Cheerleaders and Nerds

by: Chrmdpoet

Chapter 1

A/N: This is a little mini fic that was prompted to me on tumblr. It started out as a drabble, but then I received so many requests to continue, that it has now become a running mini-fic. The prompt was: "High School AU. Popular girl, Regina, has a crush on the pretty, nerdy blonde."

I will update a new chapter every time I build up a few new drabbles to compile together. I hope you all enjoy this quirky little ride. XO- Chrmdpoet

Cheerleaders and Nerds

Chapter One

"Oh god," Kathryn laughed out, tapping Regina's shoulder as they loitered around their lockers in the school hallway. Regina whirled around at Kathryn's touch and exclamation, her cheerleading skirt and her high ponytail swishing as she turned. Kathryn pointed down the hall at a blonde girl that Regina easily recognized.

"Nerd alert!" Kathryn exclaimed, still laughing.

Regina forced out a laugh, too, as the other cheerleaders hanging around them all burst into a chorus of giggles. She didn't want to seem uncool, but when the nerdy blonde girl walked slowly past them, head ducked and hair in a messy ponytail that bounced as she walked, Kathryn reached out and knocked the girls' books from her arms. That was too much for Regina.

The other girls erupted into laughter as the blonde's books tumbled to the ground and she let out a soft sigh before simply bending to pick them up. Regina forced out a quiet laugh before saying, "Let's go to class guys," and when the girls walked off, she acted like she forgot something and went back.

When the other girls were out of sight, Regina quickly bent to help the blonde retrieve her dropped items. "I'm sorry about that," she whispered quietly to the girl. "They shouldn't have done that."

The blonde looked up at her then, her cheeks flushing a light pink as she reached up to push her black-rimmed glasses up on her nose. "You laughed."

Regina hung her head a bit. "I...I'm sorry."

"It's okay," the blonde told her. "You're Regina Mills, the most popular girl in school. Can't risk your reputation to help the class's biggest nerd, right?"

"You're not..." Regina started, but didn't finish the sentence as the girl leveled her with a look that said it was pointless to argue and that everyone knew she was a nerd. Regina sucked in a breath, glancing around the hallway to make sure no one was around, before quietly admitting, "I think you're nice, Emma."

Emma's head snapped back up from her books then, her eyes widening and a goofy smile quirking at the corners of her mouth. "You know my name?" she asked softly.

It was Regina's cheeks that flushed then as she bit her lip and nodded. "I do."

Regina pinched the inside of her thigh, wincing at the pain, every time she broke her own rule. Every glance spared across the science lab where the nerdy blonde Emma Swan was seated earned her a pinch from her own fingers.

This was one of only two classes that they shared, though they sat on opposite ends of the room from one another. The seating chart was alphabetized by first name, and R was quite a ways down the line from E. Unfortunately, that made it so that Regina couldn't sit near Kathryn either, who was admittedly closer yet still rather far away.

Instead, she ended up stuck in a seat and lab partners with none other than the insufferable Ruby Lucas. The girl was a known goth, always in black, though her clothes were much skimpier than those of the other goths, various shades of red spilled throughout her hair, and constantly reeking of cigarette smoke. Regina despised her. For an hour and thirty minutes every day, she loathed her own first name for landing her in the seat beside the goth.

Regina pinched her inner thigh again as she caught herself sneaking a glance across the room to the messy blonde ponytail and the jungle-green eyes peering intently up at the teacher through thick-rimmed glasses. She didn't know why her gaze was always so drawn to the girl, and Regina would walk on glass before she ever admitted aloud just how often she found thoughts of Emma Swan swirling through her mind, but she knew it would be a problem if her friends ever realized exactly who she was always looking at.

It seemed that the day's run-in with the nerd had only made Regina's instinct to look at her increase. But god, she couldn't help herself. Something about the girl was so alluring, and Regina couldn't even begin to comprehend the way her heart always seemed to flutter wildly upon seeing her.

It had been that way for a few months now, maybe longer. She hadn't really been paying attention until recently, when she had glanced over at Emma to see that Emma was looking back at her.

The small, almost imperceptible smile that had quirked at the corners of the blonde's lips in that moment had completely captivated Regina, and from that moment on, she found herself looking more often, paying better attention. And every single time her friends picked on the nerdy girl, Regina wanted to crawl in a hole and hide.

She couldn't, though, and she couldn't tell them to stop either; at least, she didn't feel like she could. She was the head cheerleader, true, but she didn't want the other girls to think she was weak or somehow uncool for wanting to help out the nerdy blonde. She was at the top of the high-school food chain, and Emma Swan was at the bottom.

It was only natural that Regina should want to tear her to shreds for her own entertainment, for the nourishment of her own popularity. However, she didn't.

Without even realizing it, Regina had developed some strange form of attachment to the girl. She cared for her despite the fact that she hardly knew her at all.

Regina let out an audible sigh of relief when the bell rang shrilly to signify the end of class. She was out of her seat in seconds and practically sprinting toward the door, desperate to get out of the science lab and put some space between herself and Emma Swan, even though there had technically been an entire classroom between them all hour.

She apparently wasn't the only one eager to get out, though, because despite her rush, she still found herself in a throng of students all bustling out the door at the same time. Regina paid little attention to the students behind her or even beside her. Her focus was the freedom that the hallway would provide her, and so she nearly jumped with her surprise when a soft voice spoke from her right, nearer than she was comfortable with.

"Boredom or confusion?"

Regina's head snapped to the right, her ebony ponytail swishing around the side of her face with the motion. Her chocolate eyes instantly locked onto the deep forest green of Emma's, the very girl she had been trying to escape; or rather, had been trying to escape thoughts of.

"I...what?" Regina choked out, this time glancing around and behind them to see who was within earshot. She didn't see Kathryn anywhere near, meaning the blonde had likely already made it out the door, which helped Regina to breathe and relax a bit.

Emma giggled as she clutched her books against her chest with one arm and used her other hand to reach up and push her glasses up her nose, as she did frequently. Regina knew this because *she* frequently watched her do it. Regina's cheeks instantly flushed, the giggle from the blonde positively

melting her, a reaction she neither understood nor appreciated. What the hell was wrong with her?

"You glance around a lot during class," Emma explained with a soft and shy smile. "Is it because you're bored or do you not understand the lessons? Because...I..." The blonde's own cheeks flushed a soft pink then as she ducked her head a bit and followed Regina out the door of the classroom, the crowd finally thinning. "I tutor sometimes."

"Oh," Regina said, shaking her head gently, her ponytail swishing with the movement. "I--"

"Regina, come on!" a voice cut in, and Regina turned to see Kathryn latching onto her elbow and jerking her away from Emma. She had apparently been waiting in the hall. Kathryn then glanced past Regina and curled her lip in disgust. "Ew, were you talking to *her*?"

Emma quickly shook her head at the panicked look in Regina's eyes and said, "No, she was just ignoring me." She then locked eyes with Regina once more, and Regina had to fight against the sudden stinging in her own eyes.

Emma had just covered for her, had basically just put herself down, and for what? To help Regina save face with her friend. That was the only explanation.

Regina watched Emma scurry down the hallway, her head bowed and her arms tightening around her books, until she disappeared around the corner at the end of the hall. She sighed heavily as she tried to swallow down the sudden lump in her throat before turning to follow Kathryn to their lockers.

Chapter 2

A/N: Thank you everyone for the wonderful reviews, support, and response to this story. I'm glad you are all enjoying it so far. XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Two

Regina went through the rest of her day with a heavy heart, unable to shake the look she had seen in Emma's eyes as the girl had lied for her. A kind of accepted sorrow--as if Emma Swan was entirely accustomed to resigning, to being degraded. She was.

Regina could try to deny it. She could try to pretend that it wasn't like that, that it was just a bit of teasing, but she knew better. That girl had gotten the brunt of bullying since their sophomore year, and for what? For being dedicated to her grades? For being a member of every academic club available? For caring about more than just sports and gossip and name-brand clothing?

It wasn't right, the high school hierarchy. It was twisted and cruel, and Regina couldn't even openly admit that she hated it. She was a part of it after all, on the highest rung of the ladder, and while she never openly participated in bullying, she never spoke up to defend anyone either. Just because it was the lesser of two evils didn't mean it wasn't still evil.

That cold truth made her sick to her stomach, and she found herself unable to even focus during cheerleading practice--her favorite pastime. She didn't want to cheer, because she felt anything but cheerful. She felt like a monster, and all she wanted to do was go home, strip away her layers, and just...she didn't know.

Cry?

No. Regina had never been much of a crier. She hated it, positively abhorred that itching sting that would develop in her throat and behind her

eyes every time she felt moved to weep. She avoided it as much as was possible.

She didn't know what she needed, maybe just some time to think, some time to regain her sense of self and let all of this go. Forget about those sad green eyes. Forget about the shy smile. Forget about those slender fingers pushing up black-rimmed glasses. Just forget about Emma Swan.

It seemed that fate had an entirely different plan for her, though; well, maybe not fate. More like Facebook, but still. Sometimes it felt like Facebook controlled the universe, so what the hell.

Regina was laying in bed later that evening, the hours passing rapidly as she finished up some homework, earbuds tucked into her ears and Kathryn's lame pop playlist echoing in her eardrums. Regina wasn't a huge fan of it, but she listened to it anyway. She didn't really know why, but it was like a part of her felt like she had to.

She was much more into alternative music, herself, but she rarely listened to it. Too many of the girls on her squad turned their noses up at that kind of music, always spouting off like, "Why's it so depressing?!" "God, slit my wrists already."

Regina didn't find that funny in the slightest considering they had actually lost a classmate their freshman year in that very manner, but still, those girls joked like that a lot. Sometimes Regina wondered how she ended up in that group at all.

She'd loved all of that mess so much more when she was younger. The first years of high school, Regina was so attached to popularity, to teasing the underdogs, to being the head bitch in charge, but the closer they drew to graduation, the more Regina found herself wishing she had taken a different path. Been a different person. A better person.

As she was finishing up her trig homework, a loud jingle rang out from her laptop on the table beside her bed. She glanced over to see that she had a new private message on Facebook chat.

Regina crawled across her bed and peered down at the blinking tab. As soon as she saw the name, her heart shot into her throat and stuck there roughly. Still, she found herself clicking the tab and opening the message.

Emma Swan:*Hello. I hope I'm not bothering you. I know that we aren't Facebook friends, and it's probably best that we aren't considering who you are and who I am, but I just wanted to say that I'm available if you need tutoring. We never finished our conversation today, so I wasn't sure if you did or not. Anyway, I won't take up your time. Just let me know. Have a good night.*

Regina stared at the message for a long moment. A part of her was cursing the world for the fact that people who weren't her Facebook friends could still send her private messages, and yet another part of her was thanking the heavens that they could. It offered her a unique opportunity that she felt ashamed of even being remotely excited about.

She could talk to Emma without having to friend her. No one, not the other cheerleaders or jocks, would know that they were talking.

"No," Regina said quietly to herself. This was a bad idea. Bad idea. Bad idea.

And then her fingers were moving, tapping out a single word that she was fairly certain was the first nail in her high-school coffin.

Regina Mills:*Hey.*

Regina stared at the single-worded message she had just sent against her better judgment, her mouth gaping at her own action. She face-palmed and let out a soft groan. Why? *Whyyyy* had she done that?

She reached to close her laptop, wanting to just put it out of her mind. If Emma Swan ever approached her about it, she would simply say it was an accident, or if the nerdy girl actually messaged her back, then Regina could just ignore it. Right?

That was definitely what Regina thought she *should* do. It was even what she convinced herself she *would* do, but then her laptop jingled again.

Regina's gaze shot straight to the screen, her heart racing uncomfortably at the little flashing green dot next to Emma's name that made it clear the blonde was online for chat. That little green light, though, was not nearly as daunting as the blinking bar that said Regina had received yet another message from the other girl.

Don't do it, Regina told herself. Just close your laptop and let it go. You shouldn't be talking to her anyway. It will only cause problems for you and for her. It is better to let it be. High-school hierarchies exist for a reason, don't they?

Don't they? Of course they do.

Regina moved to close the laptop again, but instead found her hand hovering over the mousepad. And then she tapped.

The message popped up, and there was Emma Swan's tiny picture and Emma Swan's black-print name and Emma Swan's impossibly long-winded, unfairly adorable reply to a simple "hey".

Emma Swan: *Oh, hi there. I wasn't expecting a reply so soon, or if I'm being entirely honest, I wasn't expecting a reply at all. You ARE Regina Mills after all, haha, and I'm the person that all your friends like to make fun of so...you know...I'm a little surprised. I half-expected a group of cheerleaders to jump out of my closet and beat me with pom-poms just for messaging you. Hahaha. So, yes, definitely surprised. It's a good surprise, though. Don't get me wrong. I just am surprised, that's all. Wow, I just wrote 'surprised' entirely too many times. So, anyway...hi. Did you need tutoring?*

Regina laughed softy and then immediately perked up, glancing around foolishly as if she was afraid someone was watching her, able to see her laughing at the dorky yet adorable appeal of their class's biggest nerd. She instantly scolded herself for the reaction.

"Stop being so shallow, Regina," she muttered to herself. She was truly beginning to hate what high school had done to her, the way it had molded her outlook, shaped the way she interacted with others, made her afraid to befriend certain types of people. It was terrible and ridiculous, and she couldn't fathom why she continued to conduct herself in such a way; yet, she did.

Even if she could recognize that certain things were cruel or unfair or altogether stupid, there was a part of Regina that was terrified to step outside those things; as if all she was would merely crumble.

Regina's fingers itched atop the keys, her heart still pounding in her chest. Her mouth was dry as she bit at her bottom lip and contemplated how best to respond, because it was apparent to her now that despite knowing she shouldn't, she was *definitely* going to respond.

After one long, deep breath, Regina finally let herself type out a response. She tapped the enter button to send the message before she could stop herself, and was shocked by her own actions.

Because the message she sent was a complete and utter lie.

Regina Mills: *Maybe, yes. I might need a bit of tutoring.*

Chapter 3

Chapter Three

"Oh god, what am I doing?" Regina groaned to herself. She had just completely lied in order to what? Possibly spend a little extra time with some girl she knew nothing about but for the fact that she was a blonde, a nerd, supposedly a foster child, crazy smart, needed new glasses, had scuffs on her shoes ALWAYS, and had split ends that needed trimming?

So why, for the love of all that was holy, was her heart pounding in her chest at the mere thought of private moments with Emma Swan? Why was her skin tingling at the idea of being able to hang out with the other girl without being judged? Because this could accomplish exactly that, couldn't it?

Regina could pass off the time with Emma as a requirement rather than something she actually wanted, and hopefully none of her friends would be any the wiser. God, Regina felt horrible just thinking these things, and yet she couldn't stop herself. Her curiosity had already crawled behind the wheel and was commanding the ship.

Full speed ahead apparently.

Emma Swan: *Oh, well that's great. I mean, no, that's not great. Obviously, it's not great that you need tutoring because that implies that you are not doing so well grade-wise. Not to say that you are doing poorly or anything. I just meant that it's great because I can help, if you're interested. Like I said, I tutor sometimes, and I've got some open slots if you would like some of them. If you would prefer it not be me, though, I can set you up with another tutor.*

Regina couldn't help her smile as she read the message three times over, and before she could think on it, she found her fingers tapping out a quick response.

Regina Mills: *Do you always ramble this much?*

Emma Swan: *Yes, yes I do. I'm sorry. I swear I'm better when I'm tutoring. When I have a subject to focus on, it's easier to be clear. When it's just me and my thoughts, well...obviously, I tend to overdo it.*

Regina actually giggled at that one, immediately rolling her eyes at herself afterward. Since when did Regina Mills act like a giddy teenager with a crush? Never. Not once. Not even over Kathryn's twin brother David, who just so happened to be the hottest and most popular guy in school.

Wait? Crush? No, no, this was definitely not a crush. This was just...tutoring. Tutoring that she didn't need. Unnecessary tutoring. Unnecessary tutoring with Emma Swan.

Damn.

Regina Mills: *I see. When are you free for tutoring?*

That's right, Regina. Keep it professional. Keep it business. Keep your stupid heart inside your stupid chest.

Emma Swan: *Wednesdays and Fridays are best. I typically tutor after school at my house, but if you prefer a more neutral location or a different time, that's fine, too. We could work before school in the library since it opens early or something.*

Regina bit her lip so hard in that moment that she hissed in pain. She sucked at the sore spot to soothe it as her eyes scanned Emma's message over and over.

Her house? Her HOUSE?

Regina Mills: *I suppose your house after school would be fine. Wednesdays are better, because Fridays are game nights, so I will be unable to cancel cheer prep on those nights. I can put Kathryn in charge of the squad for practices on Wednesdays, though.*

Emma Swan: *Awesome! So, what subjects do you need help with?*

Regina froze at that question, because well...the honest answer was none of them. She was a straight-A student. Her GPA was perfect. In fact, she was fourth in their class.

What would actually make sense to say? Regina didn't have a clue, so she just chose two random subjects.

Regina Mills: *Chemistry and Art.*

Emma Swan:*Art? That's a first. I'm not sure I can help with that.*

Regina Mills:*Art History.*

Emma Swan:*Oh yeah. That I can do. :) So, this Wednesday then? I can meet you after school in the quad.*

Regina hesitated for a long moment. How was she going to pull this off? She couldn't tell her parents she required tutoring, because one, it was a lie, and two, her mother would flip her lid. And she would definitely have to tread lightly where the other cheerleaders were concerned, especially Kathryn. The less everyone knew, the better.

Was she seriously doing this, based on nothing more than a gut reaction to a person she hardly knew?

Regina let out a shaky sigh as her fingers moved again.

Regina Mills: *Yes.*

Yes, yes she was.

After the final bell rang on Wednesday to signify the end of the school day, Regina hovered inside the school much longer than was usual or even natural. She lingered in the girl's bathroom for a while after collecting her things from her locker, but unable to squash her curiosity, she quickly moved to the hallway. She took fast, nervous steps down the hallway and toward the main entrance of the building that led out into the quad where Emma Swan was supposed to be waiting to meet her.

Regina glanced around to ensure that no one was around to see where she was looking or why. More specifically, she wanted to ensure that no one who was anyone important was hanging around and would be able to see her go out to meet the nerdy girl that could potentially earn her relentless questioning, teasing, or worse from her friends. There was no one.

She had lingered long enough that basically every student was gone, except those who remained for after-school activities, like the members of her beloved cheerleading squad. Thankfully, though, cheerleading practices took place in the activities field behind the school. None of the squad would be near the front of the building at this point.

Regina had actually been surprised by how easily it had been to pass off practice to Kathryn. The blonde hadn't actually questioned her much about it at all, simply thrilled to get to step into the captain's shoes for a day. Regina had expected to be drilled about skipping practice, but then again, she had also built up a bit of a reputation for squashing people like a bug who dared question her authority; at least where cheerleading was concerned. Kathryn knew this. The entire squad did.

Maybe that's why Kathryn hadn't been more inquisitive. Or maybe she just didn't care. Either way, it played to Regina's advantage.

Regina hadn't even bothered to tell her mother about the unnecessary tutoring or her plan to spend a little time with the likes of Emma Swan. She merely decided to let her mother believe that she would be late returning home because of cheer practice, like always.

She would definitely have to come up with a plan, though, if this tutoring became a regular thing. Oh god, Regina could not even believe that she was considering the possibility of continuous unnecessary tutoring. She was still completely shocked that she had agreed to even one session.

What the hell had she been thinking?!

Regina's heart pounded forcefully in her chest as she peeked out the door of the main entrance and saw the familiar blonde girl leaning against a large oak tree in the quad. Emma's hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail with

a dated black scrunchy. Her black-rimmed glasses were pushed up on her nose, which was scrunched as Emma glanced down at a second-hand cell phone, no doubt to check the time.

Regina had lingered a little longer than necessary, but it was taking all the internal pep talk she had in her just to work up the courage to exit the building and meet the girl in the quad. She might find no one to meet, though, if she didn't move soon. Surely Emma wouldn't hang around much longer?

"Okay, Regina, just go," Regina muttered under her breath. "It's just a girl. You can go and talk to a girl for god's sake. Just go."

She sucked in a sharp breath and forced herself to move then, stepping out of the safe haven that the school had become in the last hour, and into the harsh afternoon sun.

The girl with the golden hair turned as she approached, and a bright smile lit Emma's face. It was a smile that made Regina's toes curl in a way she was not even remotely prepared to contemplate.

Just a girl, Regina reminded herself, the thought racing through her mind, but she didn't believe it for a second. Because if Emma Swan was just another girl, then why in the hell did she feel like so much more?

Chapter 4

A/N: Thank you everyone for the wonderful response to this story so far. I'm so glad that you all are enjoying it! I greatly appreciate all of your support and reviews. Enjoy! XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Four

"Hey," Emma said brightly as Regina approached, the cheerleader's chocolate ponytail swishing with every step. Emma chuckled and added, "I was starting to think you stood me up."

"This isn't a date," Regina snapped before she could stop herself. The fear that someone, even though she had already ensured that no one was around, might have overheard and misinterpreted their meeting caused a spike of fear to rip through her chest. Guilt instantly flooded through her system, her cheeks blushing crimson as Emma frowned and nodded quickly.

"Right, yeah," Emma said, clearing her throat and clutching the strap of her messenger-style backpack tighter. Her first response had been instant anger. Regina's tone had offended her, but as soon as she saw the way the brunette had glanced around the quad timidly, Emma's anger quickly faded.

It wasn't that she thought it was okay for Regina to be ashamed to be seen with her. It wasn't even that she wasn't hurt by that, because in a way, she *was,* despite how accustomed she was to that kind of behavior. It was more that she understood it.

She didn't appreciate it or even condone it, but she did understand. She knew how hard it was to break the high-school molds they all had been shaped into. It wasn't as easy as saying, "Oh hey, I'll do whatever I want and screw anybody who has a problem with it"; at least, not for most kids.

It sucked being at the bottom of the popularity totem pole--Emma knew that much from experience. People teased her and called her names. They knocked her books out of her hands and complained about her being a

teacher's pet and a brown-noser. She wasn't. She just did her work and did it well.

So, yeah, it sucked, and there was no way that Regina could even begin to imagine what that was like. At the same time, though, Emma couldn't even begin to imagine what it was like for Regina either. People always thought the popular kids had it so easy, and in a lot of ways, they did, but in other ways, they were under perhaps even more scrutiny than the non-popular kids.

At least the nerds stuck together--the goths, the band geeks, the mathletes, the quiz-bowl goons, the burn-outs. All those cliques were at the bottom in varying degrees, but they all also stuck it out together. It wasn't like that at the top. They were all predators at the top, and at any given moment, you could be a glorified member of a powerful pride, and in the next, you were being eaten alive by your own clique.

Emma could only imagine how intimidating that would be. Those at the bottom could hardly ever rise above, but they also couldn't go any lower. Those at the top, though? They never fell just a few feet. When they fell, they hit the bottom and there was no going back.

Served them right, Emma often thought. They deserved a taste of their own medicine. At the same time, though, Emma could definitely appreciate the fear that sort of life must induce. She could see it now, that fear, swirling in Regina's eyes--at constant war with something else, something lighter, something better.

The girl's will to be kind. Regina's desire to actually communicate with her. Emma could see it as clear as day, and that's what obliterated her anger. She could appreciate Regina's struggle, because as long as the girl was struggling, it meant that she was hopefully on the right path.

"I'm sorry," Regina said quietly, surprising Emma. "Snapping at you, I shouldn't have done that."

Emma smiled softly at her and nodded. "Okay," she whispered. "Ready to go then?"

Regina glanced around once more, cursing herself for having to do it at all, and nodded. "Yes, we should go."

Emma sighed as she turned and started heading toward the road, Regina on her heels. "You know," the blonde called over her shoulder, smirking despite Regina's inability to see it, "you could always just meet me at my house on Wednesdays if it's a problem to be seen with me. We don't have to walk together. I wouldn't want to damage your precious reputation or anything."

Regina flushed crimson from her forehead to her collarbones. In that moment, she wished she could melt into the earth and disappear. It was pointless to even try to deny it, because it was completely true and Emma was entirely too smart to buy any lame excuse that Regina could produce on the spot.

So, instead of wallowing around in her guilt, Regina steeled herself and quickened her pace. She shot up to Emma's side, hardened her expression, and turned the conversation back around on the nerdy girl. "Don't be ridiculous," she said, clearing her throat because the words had come out just a tad bit choked. Her cheeks were still a rosy red, but she carried on with the false confidence. "You could hardly damage my reputation."

"Uh huh," Emma chuckled, snorting mockingly.

Regina merely scoffed and tossed her head to the side, her high ponytail jerking from side to side. "Besides," the brunette added cockily, "being seen with me could actually *help your* reputation."

"Uh huh," Emma laughed out again, a teasing smile pulling at the corners of her lips. "I'm sure you're so concerned with *my* reputation."

Regina turned to glance at her then and saw Emma's playful smile. Her heart fluttered madly, and Regina cursed its weakness. She rolled her eyes, internally berating herself for having gotten into this mess in the first place, and determined not to speak to Emma again until they reached the blonde's house.

For all her hardened exterior, though, Regina's insides were soft and positively wired. She didn't know how long she would be able to keep up her defenses. Her brain screamed *ABORT! ABORT!*

But she never left Emma's side.

Regina's heart hammered madly in her chest as she and Emma made their way through town and began closing in on a particular house. It was a quaint old house located in what many of Regina's friends referred to as "the slums", or the poorer side of Storybrooke. The house was small and in need of a few updates, but cute nonetheless with its pale yellow shutters, colorful welcome mat, and multiple bird feeders hanging about.

Regina, though a bit uneasy due to the fact that she had never actually been in the slums outside the interior of her mother's car, was actually quite pleased to know that Emma's house was located there. It *greatly* lowered the chances of her being seen by anyone who might really make a difference, which meant that she might be able to keep her 'tutoring' sessions a secret a little longer than originally anticipated.

She was keeping her fingers crossed. And her toes. And her damn eyes. If it could be crossed, it was crossed.

"So, this is my place," Emma said as they climbed the stairs of the porch and headed for the rickety screen door.

"It's..." Regina hesitated for only a moment, trying to think of a proper compliment to provide. She finally settled on "...lovely."

Emma chuckled. "It's small," she said, rolling her eyes. "That's what you were really thinking."

"I was thinking nothing of the sort," Regina denied. Her flaming cheeks gave her away though.

Emma pinned the brunette with a knowing look as she fished for her keys to unlock the door, so Regina huffed out a sigh and said, "Very well. Yes, it is

small, but that does not mean that it isn't also lovely."

"Yeah, I guess," Emma said, giggling a bit. She unlocked the door, and it squeaked as it slung open. She stepped inside and motioned for Regina to follow. "Come on in."

"Thank you," Regina said with a nod before taking a tentative step inside, her chocolate eyes instantly taking in all of the detail. The place was even homier on the inside. It had what Regina could only describe as a "grandma" feel about it. There were doilies on the coffee table, the couch was a tad bit moth eaten, though still quite usable, and the television was one of those old-school big box sets.

She expected the place to smell of dust or mildew, but as a wonderful surprise, it actually smelled incredible inside the small house-like baked goods.

Chocolate-chip cookies? Regina thought. It made her stomach rumble audibly.

Emma giggled at the sound. "You want a snack or something? There are cookies."

"What kind?"

"Chocolate chip," Emma told her, and Regina smirked. She loved being right, even if it was only inside her mind. "We made them last night."

"Very well," Regina answered, offering Emma a small smile, "but only one. Thank you."

"How does anyone eat only one cookie?" Emma asked her, arching a brow as she motioned for Regina to follow her toward the kitchen.

"Cheerleaders must keep in shape," Regina told her without really thinking, as if it was her go-to automated response to all questions involving sweets.

Emma hummed in response before throwing a few cookies onto a plate for them to share. "Well, you look like you're in pretty great shape to me," she

said with a smile as she held the plate out toward Regina.

The brunette blushed, her stomach flipping at the compliment. She cleared her throat as she reached out and took one of the cookies. "That's because I never eat more than one," she managed to choke out, and then Regina shocked the hell out of herself by offering the blonde a cute little wink.

Oh, what the hell are you doing, Regina? Stop making a fool of yourself.

She was pleasantly surprised to see Emma's cheeks tint to a soft pink, though.

"So, should we go up, then?" Emma asked after an awkward moment of silence in which both girls merely stood in front of the kitchen counter, munching quietly on one cookie each.

"Up?" Regina asked, swallowing a little too soon. The too-large chunk of cookie stung as it went down her throat, but she managed not to audibly choke and embarrass herself, which she was thankful for.

"Yeah," Emma said, laughing awkwardly as she scratched her messy ponytail before pushing her glasses up on her nose. "To my room."

"Oh," Regina said, and now her heart felt like it might just burst through her rib cage at any minute and make a hormonal teenage mess all over Emma's kitchen floor. She wished it would stop thundering so hard, because the harder it beat, the more Regina feared that Emma would hear it.

Stop being such a weirdo, Regina scolded herself before licking her lips, nodding quickly, and saying, "Right. Okay. Sure."

She witnessed Emma's goofy, adorable grin for only a moment before the nerdy girl was trudging up the creaky steps to the second floor, Regina timidly following behind.

Chapter 5

Chapter Five

The floor creaked heavily as Regina followed Emma up the stairs and into the blonde's bedroom. Regina wasn't surprised to find that it was quite small. In fact, the entire bedroom was just a smidgen larger than Regina's bedroom *closet*, which for some reason made Regina feel guilty all over again.

Stop feeling guilty, she told herself. *It's not my fault that my parents have a lot of money and hers don't*.

Ugh, she even felt guilty for thinking *that*.

Every second that Regina spent with Emma Swan had her seriously questioning her sanity. What the hell had she been thinking, getting herself into all of this? She was risking her reputation and apparently her hormones (because she felt like she might just overheat and explode any minute from *blushing* alone) by simply being in the same breathing space as the nerdy girl, let alone actually *at Emma's house*.

This entire thing was completely murder-fricking-suicide, and Regina was actively playing a role. She had organized the entire damn thing. If she had any clue what was good for her, she would muster up the strength to just turn on her heel and leave.

Instead, though, Regina followed Emma to the bed.

The cheerleader rolled her eyes as she dropped down onto the springy mattress. *Weak,* she berated herself. *So weak.*

Regina avoided looking at Emma while the nerd shuffled around at a rickety old wooden desk, pulling out a few notebooks, writing utensils, and other things. She focused, instead, on the room she now found herself in.

The walls were painted robin's-egg blue, which Regina found to be a little too childish for a seventeen-year-old girl, but then again, she figured Emma's mother or foster mother or whatever had chosen it rather than Emma herself. The room was surprisingly bare of belongings, and had Emma not told Regina that it was her bedroom, the brunette would never have assumed this to be a teenager's bedroom.

For most teens, their bedrooms were their sanctuaries and easily communicated their personalities or the trends that they were into, but not Emma's room. There wasn't much in the nerdy girl's room besides the bed, the old desk, a dresser, a black bean bag, and a small bedside table. There weren't any posters or pictures on the wall. There wasn't a mess of clothing on the floor, and given that Emma's small closet door in the corner of the room was wide open, Regina could see that there weren't many clothes in there either. There really wasn't anything in the room to express Emma's personality.

In fact, the room easily could've passed as a guest room--impersonal and rarely used. The only personal touch that Regina could see in the entire room was what looked like a hand-knitted throw peeking out from beneath the blonde's pillow. It was white with purple lace, and it had the name Emma embroidered across it. It was beautiful, but it was quite literally the only visible thing in the room that seemed to be even remotely personal.

Regina found that absolutely fascinating, and even though she wasn't entirely sure why, it also saddened her a bit. Why was Emma's room so bland? Where were all the things the blonde loved? Where were the personal touches? Where were the expressions of self that should have decorated the blonde's little sanctuary? Where was *Emma* in this empty room?

"So," Emma said, startling Regina and bringing the cheerleader back to the moment, "how's it feel to be on the poor side of town?"

Regina was rather taken aback by the question as a smirking Emma plopped down on the bed beside her with several supplies. The few times that she had seen others interact with the nerd at school, and the even fewer times

that Regina herself had interacted with her as of late, Emma had seemed quite shy. Now that they were outside the walls of Storybrooke High, though, it seemed that the blonde was a tad bolder and quite witty. She had a way of putting Regina on the spot and making the brunette feel entirely out of her element.

Regina cleared her throat roughly. "Uh..." she muttered, which she found completely mortifying, because she never muttered. At least, she tried to never mutter. Every time she did, she heard her mother's voice in her head telling her that only undignified and uneducated people mutter. However, it seemed that the adorable enigma that was Emma Swan could cause her to mutter on a regular basis. "I feel fine," she finally finished.

Emma only continued to smirk at her, and Regina's cheeks felt as if they were on fire. "I'm not as judgmental as you might think," Regina huffed out after a moment.

"So you know what I'm thinking now?" Emma teased, grinning wickedly at the brunette across from her. "When did I ever call you judgmental?"

"You assume I am because of my upbringing," Regina said simply. "That is why you keep baiting me, first with the comment about your house being small and now with the comment about me never having visited this part of our town. Why bait me unless you expect me to be judgmental and snobby?"

Emma arched one thin brow at the cheerleader. "You're good," she said after a moment, chuckling. "You're right. I was baiting you, and I'm sorry, but I've dealt with a lot of rich, popular kids, and I just wanted to make sure that you weren't here as a prank to humiliate me or something."

Regina's heart clenched painfully in her chest, and she closed her eyes as she sucked in a gentle breath and released it in a sigh. She couldn't bring herself to linger on the thought of this girl basically just assuming that she was being set up for humiliation. It was too heartbreaking to even consider; thus, Regina took a breath and let it go.

She opened her eyes and locked them hard onto Emma's. "I'm not perfect," Regina told her, "and I *can* be a bitch. That's no secret, but I would *never* do that."

Emma held her gaze for a long moment before letting out another awkward chuckle to eradicate the growing tension between them. She rubbed at the back of her neck as she nodded gently and said, "You know...I think I believe you."

Just like that, Regina's heart went from shriveling in its own throbbing ache to swelling into a bright red balloon on the verge of bursting with joy. Her emotions were going to get her killed, by sheer over-feeling alone. This was getting legitimately ridiculous, and the worst part was that Regina didn't even understand it.

It had to be some sort of attraction. Of that, she was certain. There was no way she was merely intrigued by a person she knew absolutely nothing about to the point of creating an elaborate scheme to be around said person on a more regular basis. Nope. She was definitely attracted to Emma Swan.

That part didn't freak her out too much. She didn't do an almost daily google-image search of Angelina Jolie just to admire the woman's clothing choices, okay? Regina was fully aware that she had a taste for the ladies, even if she had never acted on it. It was more that the attraction felt like it extended beyond one of a purely physical nature, and that's what confused her.

She didn't even know this girl, yet she somehow also felt like she did. Maybe it was that little flicker of loneliness she sometimes saw in the girl's green eyes from across the room or while passing her in the hallway. Whatever it was, it made Regina feel like a damn buzzing wasp.

And Emma Swan was the bug lamp.

In other words, Regina desperately wanted to be closer to her, but she was pretty positive that it would mean her entire reputation and life disappearing in one loud, resounding, and painful *ZAP!*

"So, Chemistry, right?" Emma asked after a moment, and Regina blinked several times, confused.

Oh right. The tutoring. The unnecessary tutoring.

"Yes," the cheerleader answered. "Shall we start there?" She reached for her own bag and pulled her Chemistry book from its clutches.

Emma giggled as she shook her head. "Yes, Regina," she said in her best imitation of a prim and proper voice, "yes we *shall*."

Regina glared at her playfully, pursing her lips to keep from laughing. "Watch it," she said.

Emma just grinned at her. "What do you want me to watch?" the blonde challenged, and Regina's heart just dropped right into her stomach and burned and burned and burned, before sinking further and sending that flame straight between her legs. It shocked and irritated Regina at the same time, because she was certain her cheeks were as flaming as her lady parts in that moment, and she was really, REALLY trying to keep her cool.

Oh god, she thought, groaning internally. *This fricking nerd is going to be the death of me.*

Emma thankfully saved her from having to reply. The blonde chuckled lightly and passed a notebook over to Regina. "Let's just start with this week's lesson, yeah?"

Regina swallowed thickly and readied her pen. "Sure," she whispered, hating how breathy her voice sounded with the singular word.

Chapter 6

A/N: For those wondering or requesting, the chapters will not be any longer. They will all range between 1500 and 2000 words. This is because, as I stated in my Author's Note in chapter one, this story is written in short bursts/drabbles on tumblr by request. When I collect two or three drabbles, I compile them into one of these chapters and post it here. You would be waiting quite some time for updates any longer than these, as I cannot work on my tumblr prompts as often as I would like to. I hope that explains it for any of you wondering, and I hope you will all still enjoy the story as is. Please take care, and enjoy! XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Six

Regina could practically feel the boredom bubbling in her veins. She was certain that all of her blood would dry up with it at any moment, and she would simply crumble into a pile of dust on Emma Swan's bed. How in the hell had she ever thought that she would be able to endure two hours of unnecessary tutoring every week?

It was like slow torture, listening to Emma drone on about the hows and whys of whatever the hell it was that they were currently focusing on. The only saving grace of any of it was how adorably excited Emma seemed to get about the subject, or any subject for that matter. The girl just really seemed to enjoy learning and teaching.

The nerd's little puns and jokes throughout were laughably bad, but Regina couldn't help but to laugh at the cute way that Emma cracked up at herself and actually slapped her knee a few times after a joke.

"Uh...Regina?"

Regina's head snapped up from where it had been lolling in the palm of her hand while her elbow rested on her leg. Her eyes were wide as she stared at Emma's concerned expression. "I'm sorry," Regina said quickly. "What?"

Emma simply smiled at her. "I just asked you if you understood the equation or if you needed me to go over it with you once more."

"Oh, right," Regina said. "I think-"

"It's okay if you're having trouble with it," Emma said, cutting in to reassure her. "This stuff isn't always easy to get the first time, all of this math mixed in with the science."

Regina laughed awkwardly, thankful that Emma had basically given her an out, because she obviously couldn't just tell the blonde that she hadn't heard her due to having been nearly asleep from boredom. That would give away just how easily Regina *did,* in fact, understand the equation. Then again, part of Regina wanted to just come clean.

Somehow, she didn't think that something along the lines of, "Of course I get it. I have an A in this class. I'm only here because your strange yet adorable nerdy allure haunts my dreams," would go over very well with the other girl.

So, instead, Regina cleared her throat and tried to look sweetly embarrassed as she said, "Yes, I would much rather the two subjects remain separate. There should be math, and there should be science, not-"

"Math-y science," Emma cut in, giggling as she finished for her. "Or science-y math; whichever."

Regina grinned at her, rolling her eyes and letting out a soft chuckle. "Right," she agreed, and Emma just nodded.

"If it makes you feel any better," the blonde said, "I sometimes fall asleep in this class."

Regina grinned slyly at her before saying, "No you don't."

"Uh huh," Emma argued, nodding frantically.

"No you don't," Regina said again, laughing. "I wa-" She quickly cut herself off with a rough clearing of her throat. She absolutely had NOT just almost

admitted that she would've known because she *watches* her.

One should never reveal one's stalker-y habits to the subject of said habits whilst one is attempting to...

What the hell *was* she attempting to do? *Woo* her? Nope. There was no wooing going on. *Seduce* her? No. Regina was fairly certain that all of her awkward moments of muttering and nervous laughter amounted to the opposite of a calculated seduction.

So, honestly, Regina didn't have a clue what she was trying to do, but she knew that the fact that she liked to watch Emma from across the Chemistry lab was a fact better kept secret than put on display.

"I, uh," she muttered after clearing her throat. "I doubt the smartest student in the class would ever sleep through a lesson."

Emma pushed her glasses up on her nose as her face scrunched with her smile. "But I do!" she laughed out. "I mean, I have."

"I don't believe you," Regina teased, returning the girl's smile. "I bet you sit up perfectly straight in your chair with your pen at the ready and your eyes all wide and eager, nodding with each detail as you take notes. I bet your academia-loving heart pitter-patters with every lesson."

Emma chewed at her bottom lip, her cheeks red, before she burst into laughter, and Regina followed after. Regina's own heart fluttered wildly in her chest with the sound of the girl's laughter and the smile that had bloomed across Emma's lips.

Regina had accomplished many things in her young life. She had sporting trophies, academic medals and certificates, and even pageant trophies from when she was younger, but in that moment...

In that moment, evoking such a beautiful sound from such a beautiful girl was the one achievement that Regina was most proud of.

"Okay, fine," Emma laughed out. "So, I only ever fell asleep twice, and both times I had a migraine."

"See," Regina teased. "I was right. You are too good of a student to sleep through class."

"Hey, it's not like that's a bad thing," Emma told her. "My grades might help me get a good scholarship; hopefully more than one."

Things fell quickly into place for Regina then, realization touching her in ways that ached. Emma was a smart girl, but she was also incredibly driven because she had to be. If Regina was a poor student, she could afford to be. Her parents could afford to pay for her education, but Emma didn't have that luxury.

That had to be a large part of the reason that the blonde worked her ass off to maintain a perfect GPA and keep her spot at the top of their class, which wasn't easy. Storybrooke High was a very academically challenging school. The curriculum was advanced, and while many of the students who had been at the school for years and years were accustomed to it and could sail through some courses, the level of difficulty often became apparent with transfer students. Many students who transferred in were failing courses within the first few months. Some quickly got it together, and others couldn't hack it and transferred back out or dropped into a lower class.

Emma Swan was the exception to this trend. She had only been at Storybrooke since their sophomore year, having transferred in from somewhere in Massachusetts if Regina remembered correctly, and the teachers had taken right to her. She wrote killer essays and always had at least five full pages of notes written out after every lesson. By the end of their sophomore year, Emma had floated up into the higher ranks of their class, and by the end of their junior year, she had taken the top spot.

And that was wonderful for Emma, but it had only earned her more teasing and bullying from the students who had been at Storybrooke for years and had been pushed from their ranks by the recently transferred foster kid in secondhand clothes.

Regina's heart ached as she realized that something that should earn Emma respect-the girl's motivation and desire to achieve and be more and create a successful future for herself-gained her nothing but knocks to her self-esteem, trips in the hallway, degrading comments, and worse.

"Hey," Emma said softly, shaking Regina from her thoughts. "You okay?"

"Yes," Regina answered quickly, her voice slightly strained. "I simply...um, which colleges are you interested in?"

"Any of them," Emma told her honestly, shrugging. "Hopefully I can get into a prestigious university, but I'm not going to hold my breath, you know? I will go where I can afford to go, and it's as simple as that."

Regina's skin was practically crawling. She felt so uncomfortable in that moment, yet Emma seemed perfectly fine with talking about the vast differences in their bank accounts and financial possibilities for the future. It didn't seem to set the blonde on edge at all.

"Anyway," Emma said, sighing, "I've seen *you* fall asleep in class a few times."

Regina's cheeks instantly flamed, and Emma chuckled at the blush. "Maybe that's why you need tutoring," the nerd joked.

With her cheeks still burning, Regina narrowed her eyes at the girl across from her and said, "Touché, Emma. Touché."

Emma cracked up at that. "Well, as long as you don't fall asleep during our tutoring sessions..."

Regina bit her bottom lip as she glanced down at her hands, which were unconsciously picking at Emma's bedspread. "I wasn't planning to," she answered quietly.

"Well, how could you?" Emma laughed out. "There's so much chemistry between us that it's impossible not to be totally in the moment."

Regina's head snapped up so fast that it audibly cracked. Was Emma actually...had she just...did *Emma* feel it, too?!

Regina's insides felt like they were on fire as she registered the fact that the girl across from her was apparently more than aware of the chemistry that existed between them, that draw that Regina had felt for quite some time now.

Oh god, Regina thought. *Oh god, what do I do now?*

Should she agree? Should she make a move? Should she ask the girl on a date? No, she couldn't ask her on a date! What the hell was she thinking?

But then...

Emma snorted with laughter as she asked, "Get it?" The nerdy girl motioned to the Chemistry books and notes spread out on the bed between them then as she said, "There's so much *chemistry between us*. Get it?"

Regina's brain short-circuited as she gaped at the girl across from her while Emma guffawed at her own little pun. A moment ago, Regina had been elated to hear the blonde laugh. In this moment, though, Regina had nothing but a burning urge to smack the ever-loving hell out of Emma Swan.

She had nearly given herself away over a damn pun! Was it not enough that Emma was a nerd in the realm of all things academic? She just had to also be one of those nerds that loved to make corny jokes and laugh at herself.

It would have been stupidly cute if it weren't for the fact that it had nearly made Regina's heart explode and her panties catch fire.

Regina shook her head and let out a long sigh before saying, "Yes, Emma. I get it."

Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

"You look so bored."

Regina's cheeks flushed a soft pink as she looked up, Emma's words causing a flood of guilt to rush through her insides. "I apologize," the brunette replied quietly. "Art History is rather dull."

"It totally is," Emma agreed. "Then again, we hardly ever struggle with the subjects that excite us, right? The boring ones are always the hardest to stick with."

"I suppose that is true, yes," Regina said, smiling somewhat shyly. She felt like the biggest idiot in the world or the biggest asshole, or the biggest idiotic asshole.

This entire unnecessary tutoring thing had been the dumbest, most ridiculous idea, and Regina was completely embarrassed at having come up with it in the first place, let alone actually carrying it out. On top of that, she wasn't even being convincing. She wasn't making any moves or flirting (at least, not very well) or even taking this prime opportunity to ogle the adorableness that was Emma Swan. Instead, she was falling the hell asleep thanks to her lame teacher's even lamer art-history lessons.

She was failing Get-The-Girl 101 miserably, and Regina did not approve.

"Do you want to take a break or something?" Emma asked, laughing softly and snapping Regina out of her self-loathing thoughts. She didn't want to make Regina feel uncomfortable or guilty, but it was true that the cheerleader had appeared to be on the verge of sleep throughout most of their session thus far.

Emma wasn't entirely surprised, if she was being honest, because well, plenty of the other kids she had tutored had been much the same. They zoned out because they didn't quite understand the material. Emma could

relate to that, but it wouldn't help them earn better grades. That's why she always tried to incorporate breaks or snacks or sometimes even fun little games to try to keep the tutoring sessions interesting and lively.

"Or I suppose we could go ahead and stop for the day," Emma added. "It's already been about an hour and a half already, so..."

Regina's heart sank into her stomach. She couldn't tell if Emma was hopeful that the lesson could be over or disappointed or entirely indifferent. It irked her on so many levels.

"Yes," she answered quietly, the word not much more than a whisper. "I suppose we could call it a day now."

"Okay," Emma said, smiling softly at the cheerleader. "Well, then I guess we can pick up with the next lesson next week then. You still want to stick with Wednesdays?"

Regina's stomach lurched as she toiled over what to say. Part of her wanted to confess. Part of her wanted to tell Emma that she wished not to continue with tutoring. The part of her that won out, though, simply said, "Yes, Wednesdays."

"Okay," Emma replied again. "Well grab your stuff then, and I'll walk you out."

Regina quickly gathered her things, her eyes stinging with her anger at herself. Why was she torturing herself this way? She should just leave and not come back, not talk to the girl again, and save herself the utter torment that Emma Swan's mere existence wreaked on her mind and her body. She should just stop all of this. She knew she should, but she couldn't, and Regina could not for the life of her understand why.

Regina followed Emma back down the creaking stairs of the blonde's little house and over to the front door. Emma smiled at her and asked, "Is one of your parents picking you up?"

The cheerleader simply shook her head, not wanting to admit that her parents didn't even know that she was there. "I'm walking," she answered after a moment.

"Oh okay," Emma said, still smiling.

Regina expected to say goodbye to the nerdy girl then and there, but before she could say anything at all, Emma moved right by her. She just opened the door and walked outside, one arm stretched backward to hold the door for Regina.

Regina stepped out and paused even as Emma closed the front door behind her and then headed down the steps of the front porch. The blonde then turned back and looked up at her, head cocked to the side. "You coming?" she asked.

"Yes, but..." Regina hesitated, shuffling from foot to foot before making her way down the steps of the porch and over to where Emma waited. "Where are *you* going?"

"Oh," Emma laughed out. "I'm walking you home, of course."

Regina gaped at the girl for a long moment before simply blurting, "Why?"

"Why not?" Emma challenged with a grin. When Regina continued to merely gape at her, Emma just sighed and said, "Look, it's going to start getting dark soon. I want to walk you home to make sure you get there okay and everything."

Regina's heart melted like a chocolate bar in the sun, sugar bubbling and spreading through her chest in every direction. "You would do that?"

"That's what I just said, isn't it?" Emma asked, grinning and chuckling. "Why are you so surprised?"

"I..." Regina paused, unsure of what to say in response. After a moment, she merely shook her head, cleared her throat, and said, "Thank you for the

offer, but then you would be on your own for the return walk, and it likely *will* be dark by then."

"So?"

"So," Regina deadpanned, pinning Emma with a telling stare.

Emma just laughed. "I'll be fine," she told the cheerleader. "I used to...nevermind. Look, I can look after myself, alright? Please just let me walk you home?"

Regina stared at the nerdy blonde for a long moment, part of her desperately wanting to ask what it was that Emma had been about to divulge, but she also didn't want to push any boundaries or buttons. If Emma had elected not to tell her, then it was likely something that the blonde did not feel comfortable sharing. Regina respected that.

Everyone had secrets, and Regina was currently hiding a huge one. So, she could definitely accept that there were things Emma Swan did not want to share; at least, not yet. Maybe that would change, though.

Maybe a lot of things would change.

Regina rolled her eyes internally at the thought. She really needed to have a little chat with her inner optimist and tell that bitch to stop getting her into situations like this one with all of her hopeful thoughts and ideas. She really needed to let go of this delusion that she and Emma could become something more than two separate ends of a totem pole.

Still, she let out a soft sigh and nodded. "Okay then."

"So, where are *you* going to college?" Emma asked as they walked along the mostly deserted streets of Storybrooke. It was a small town, and so everyone was pretty much home for the evening by no later than six o'clock. So, it wasn't incredibly surprising that at nearly five-thirty, it was already quieting down.

"I haven't yet decided," Regina told her. She started to divulge that she had already received early acceptance letters to a few ivy-league universities, but given the circumstances, she decided to keep that information to herself. "I imagine I will attend an ivy-league school," she admitted, though, "likely my father's alma mater."

"Which is?" Emma inquired.

"Princeton."

"Oh wow," Emma said, and Regina just nodded.

A silence that was surprisingly comfortable developed between them as they walked, and Regina wished she could close her eyes and just absorb it, but she wasn't willing to risk losing her balance and falling on her ass. So, she kept her eyes open and her face set forward, simply enjoying the moment as much as she could without outwardly showing it.

"What's it like?" Emma asked after a long moment, and Regina glanced over at her.

"What's what like?"

"Being up there," Emma said, sighing, "at the top of everything."

"Oh," Regina said, finally understanding. Emma wanted to know what it was like to be at the top of the high-school food chain. Regina hated the way that simple question made her feel like throwing up.

"Everyone loves you," the nerd continued, and Regina cut her off, scoffing.

"Being at the top does *not* mean that everyone *loves* me," Regina told her, seriously. "Some people are afraid of me. Some people respect me. Some people *like* me, but few people there actually *love* me. You can't truly love someone if you don't know them."

"What do you mean?" Emma asked, brows furrowing and the toes of her shoes scuffing against the pavement as they walked along the edge of the street.

Regina stayed quiet for a long moment, unsure of how to proceed. She was surprised by her little outburst, but at the same time, it had felt good to say it. "I just mean that so many of us hardly *know* one another as anything other than a fellow member of a particular club or clique," she finally explained after a moment.

"Oh," Emma said, nodding. "Yeah, I guess that's true. I'd never really thought of it that way before. Still, everyone wants to *be* you. That must be cool."

"Do *you*?" Regina challenged, glancing at the blonde again.

"Do I what?" Emma asked. "Do I want to be you?"

"Yes," Regina replied. "You said *everyone*."

Emma chuckled. "I'll admit that there are a lot of things about you and your life that I envy, even when I try not to."

Regina's heart clenched tightly in her chest. "It's easy to envy what we only ever see one side of," she answered in a whisper, and Emma stopped in the road beside her.

"Hey," the blonde said, reaching out somewhat hesitantly to touch Regina's shoulder. "I didn't...Sorry. I guess it's not always great to be at the top, yeah?"

Regina looked up then and locked onto those soft green eyes, falling into them dizzily. She took a deep breath and answered, "It definitely has its downsides."

Emma nodded, accepting that answer, before patting Regina's arm and turning to resume walking. They walked together in silence again until Regina could see her large mansion looming in the near distance. Their shoulders brushed and Regina felt a jolt of excitement ripple through her, excitement and strangely, comfort.

"Like putting down others who don't deserve it," Regina said quietly, seemingly out of nowhere.

"Huh?" Emma asked, confused.

Regina stopped in the road again and turned to face her. "One of the downsides of being at the top," Regina told her, "is that too many of us make a habit of putting down others who don't deserve it. People like *you*."

Emma gaped at the girl for a moment, but before she could respond, Regina cleared her throat and motioned ahead of them. "I can make it on my own from here," she told the nerdy girl, "but thank you for walking me home. That was sweet of you."

"Uh, yeah," Emma stuttered out. "Yeah, no problem. So, I guess I'll see you around then."

Regina smiled softly at her. "Yes, I suppose you will."

Without another word, the cheerleader turned and walked briskly away, her high ponytail swishing and her heart pounding with every step.

Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

Regina slipped through the front door of her home and tried to quietly make her way up the grand staircase. She only made it up three steps, though, before her mother's voice drifted to her from the study on the first floor.

"Regina, dear."

It was low and silky, and Regina was always surprised at how easily her mother's voice carried throughout the house even though the woman never raised her voice above a soft, slithering serpent of a melody.

Regina knew better than to call back to her mother. Shouting out something like "What?!" would earn her a swat or two to the inside of her wrist, a smack to the cheek, or a grounding.

Civilized persons do not raise their voices, Regina, nor do they speak in single-word sentences with no substance.

The number of lessons and mottoes that Regina had memorized from excessive repetition over the years had grown beyond the point of counting. To Regina, they seemed endless.

Regina took careful and quiet, but certainly quick, steps toward her mother's study.

We do not stomp our feet when we walk, Regina. We are not cattle stampeding around, and thus, we will not act as such.

Don't dally, dear. To be prompt is to be successful, for wasting time wastes opportunity.

Regina halted in the frame of her mother's open study door. The elder brunette woman was seated on a small love-seat by a large fireplace, glasses

perched on the tip of her nose, and eyes scanning over a stack of papers in her lap.

"You called, Mother?" Regina said quietly.

Without looking up, Cora nodded. "Come sit, dear."

Regina did as she was told, lowering herself daintily onto the opposite end of the love-seat.

"How was school?"

Regina had to fight the urge to roll her eyes. Her mother never really cared about what was going on at school or how Regina's day went; at least, Regina didn't believe she did. It seemed the only time that Cora Mills took notice and seemed to care was when something out of the ordinary took place, or when the school attempted to make the students endure something that she did not approve of. Regina still shuddered every time she thought of freshman year when her class's science teacher asked them to create a PowerPoint Presentation on sexually-transmitted diseases, including photographs of cases of each. Regina had thought it perfectly acceptable, informative, and perhaps even preventative given how horrid some of the photos had been, but Cora had been positively appalled.

The Mills matriarch had lit up the next week's school-board meeting like a blazing wildfire, until all the parents were somehow just as riled up as she was. That science teacher was let go at the end of the year, and though the "official" reason had been something else entirely, everyone knew that Regina's mother had been the real reason.

Thankfully, none of the teachers took out their dislike of Cora Mills on her daughter. Regina was fortunate to be favored by many of the teachers simply because she was respectful and a good student, but she was also more than aware that several of the school staff tiptoed around her at times. She never, for example, had been denied a hall pass or bathroom break, and her suggestions for projects or benefits for various school clubs were *always* accepted.

"It was fine, Mother," Regina answered sweetly. "Thank you for asking. How was your day?"

"Quite productive, dear," Cora answered, looking up for only a moment to offer her daughter a quick tight-lipped smile. "How was cheerleading practice? Has Ashley improved her high kick?"

Regina's heart began to thud in her chest. She took a breath to try to calm herself down, because surely her mother had no way of knowing that she had skipped practice. No. No way. Everything was fine.

"It went well," Regina lied, though she was almost certain that it actually *had* gone well. Surely Kathryn would have been blowing her phone up if it hadn't. "Ashley has improved. The threat of being removed from the squad and replaced prior to the semi-final cheer tournament worked as well as you said it would. Her attitude improved as well, so that is a plus."

Cora smirked, and Regina had to fight the urge to do the same. She hated that sometimes she got a little thrill from being manipulative like her mother had taught her to often be. It almost felt like it was ingrained in her somehow--like it was a tiny black spot on her heart that no matter what she did, would never grow smaller or disappear. Whenever she found herself enjoying the successes that some small manipulations gained her, Regina always immediately felt disgusted with herself. Sometimes, she felt like her mother had tainted her, had perpetuated the attitude and idea of being better than everyone else.

Regina positively abhorred it.

Her father, Henry, wasn't much better either. He, at least, was rarely outwardly superior. He was more complacent and silent than anything. He let Cora do as she pleased, and he never challenged any of it.

This lifestyle made Regina sick. She didn't want to be superior. She just wanted to be happy.

"You see, Regina," Cora said, still smirking, "everyone has a weakness. Typically, it is love. Threaten whatever or whomever a person loves, and

you will find them quickly changing their minds."

Regina swallowed the bile that shot up her throat at the wicked glint in her mother's eyes. She took a deep, steadying breath, closed her eyes, and quietly agreed. "Yes, Mother." She knew better than to argue her mother's point.

She could feel Cora's eyes on her for a long moment, and then the elder brunette quietly said, "Dinner will be in one hour, dear."

Regina recognized the statement for what it was--a dismissal. She nodded curtly and then rose from the love-seat and made her way quickly and quietly from her mother's study and up to her own bedroom.

Regina collapsed onto her bed, letting out a long sigh. She rested an arm over her eyes and took several deep, relaxing breaths until her stomach settled. She then reached for her laptop just as her cell phone jingled from her bag.

She grabbed her cell and checked the message. Kathryn.

Hey bitch. 4got 2 ask. Y did u need 2 skip cheer 2day?

Regina rolled her eyes, forever appalled at the horrid way her best friend texted. It was somewhere around the fifteenth time Regina had rolled her eyes that day, and that was a slow day. The cheerleader was thoroughly surprised that her eyes didn't just roll right out of her skull and splat onto the ground most days, because between the idiots at school, Kathryn's complete inability to recognize that the universe did not actually revolve around the popular kids at school, and her mother's outdated, cruel, and often completely stupid viewpoints, Regina's eyes were constantly in orbit. She believed it would be entirely appropriate to walk around with three giant letters sharpie-d onto her forehead.

FML

She rolled her eyes one more time before typing out a quick response.

I had a prior engagement. In fact, I will likely be unable to attend cheer practices on Wednesdays from now on.

Literally less than ten seconds passed before her phone jingled with Kathryn's response.

Wow, vague much?!

Eye-roll number seventeen? Or something like that.

It isn't important, Regina replied. *It is an extracurricular that I have to do. I will be at every other practice, though. Furthermore, shouldn't you simply be thrilled that you get to captain the squad in my absence?*

Kathryn's reply was, again, immediate.

Ha! Good pt, bitch! N-E-way, was just curious. Chill. Nothin bad, rite?!

Regina did cave to a small smile at that. Kathryn had rare moments of showing actual care, and each one was greatly appreciated.

No, nothing bad, Kathryn. I would tell you if it was. I have to go for dinner, though. See you tomorrow. XX

Kathryn shot back a quick message. *Love ya!* And then Regina threw her phone to the side and reached for her laptop once more.

When she opened her Facebook tab, she was surprised to see that she had a blinking chat bar at the bottom of the screen. Her heart skipped a beat when she realized that that blinking bar was branded with Emma Swan's tiny picture and boldfaced name again. It positively thrilled her.

She quickly clicked to open the message, and the text inside nearly caused her heart to jump right out of her chest.

Emma Swan: *Hi again. I just wanted to let you know that I made it home safely. I mean, in case you were curious or...Anyway, so I was thinking that it might be best, you know since I will be tutoring you every week, if I give you my number. It's (617) 778-3849. So, there you go. That's my number. It's*

okay if you don't want to give me yours. I mean, I don't want you to feel like you have to give me yours or anything. It is perfectly fine if you choose not to.

Regina smiled as she read the message over again. Emma's rambling somehow always managed to make her stomach flip in the most pleasant way, which Regina found so strange because when other people rambled, it only added to Regina's list of reasons to roll her eyes. She typically found it incredibly annoying. With Emma, though, it was almost endearing.

Regina bit her lip as she contemplated how best to respond to Emma's message, and then before she even really realized what she was doing, her laptop was off her lap, and her thumbs were tapping out a message on her phone.

What area code is your number? I don't recognize it. Is it somewhere in Maine?

A moment later, Regina's phone jingled with a response.

It's Massachusetts.

Only about three seconds passed before Regina's phone jingled again.

Wait a minute. Who the hell is this?

Regina laughed out loud then, curling back into her pillow and grinning ridiculously at her phone.

Chapter 9

A/N: Thank you everyone for all the continued support of this little story. It's been a joy to write thus far, and all of your follows, favorites, and reviews mean so much to me and are greatly appreciated. So, thank you. Enjoy! XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Nine

Dinner was a boring affair as always. Regina listened to her parents ramble on about business this and town-gossip that. She answered the few questions tossed her way with her typical one-to-two-word responses, and ate her dinner as fast as she could without being reprimanded by her mother for eating like a "starved homeless savage." As soon as she shoveled the last bite into her mouth and swallowed, Regina dabbed at her mouth with her napkin and asked to be excused.

"Very well, dear," Cora said, nodding.

"Are you alright, Regina?" Henry added as the cheerleader rose from the table.

"Yes, Father," she answered with a tight smile. "Simply exhausted, is all."

He smiled softly at her. "Off to bed then."

"Yes sir," she answered. "Goodnight."

Both her parents echoed the word, and then Regina was walking slowly from the dining room. As soon as she was out of her parents' sight, she sprinted up the stairs and toward her room. She was eager to get back to the text conversation with Emma that she had had to simply leave hanging due to dinner.

As soon as Regina made it back to her room, she dove for her phone where she had stuffed it under the pillows on her bed. The smile that broke over

her lips upon seeing that she had four unread messages from her nerdy tutor quickly fell when she opened the messages and saw the content.

It's kind of crazy that Regina Mills is texting me. :)

Regina had grinned at that one and at the next one as well, butterflies fluttering wildly in her stomach.

So, tell me about yourself. What kind of stuff do you like to do other than cheerleading?

Regina's smile faltered at the next one.

...Regina? You still there?

Then finally, Regina read the last one, and her stomach just plummeted.

Sorry. I guess I thought we kind of hit it off and could be friends. I forgot for a moment that you were royalty and I'm just a lowly peasant. We will keep it professional from now on--just tutoring. Goodnight Regina.

Regina sighed as her chest clenched painfully. She rubbed at the spot in a pointless attempt to alleviate the pain as she let her phone fall to the mattress beside her. She turned on her side and faced the wall then, curling into a ball and closing her eyes.

The next day, Regina shot into the school, her high ponytail swinging viciously as she made her way quickly to her locker. She threw her bag inside her locker once she got there and then quickly checked herself over in the mirror that she had hung on the inside of the locker door. She had taken special care in her appearance that day, more-so than usual.

Regina rolled her eyes at the thought that the extra effort was for Emma, but well, it *was* for Emma. She could deny as much out loud, but the truth sang like a canary inside her head.

Her makeup wasn't heavy. She never needed much and didn't like to clog her pores up anyway. Her eyebrows were freshly plucked. Her designer

jeans made her ass look incredible, which only became more apparent as a few of the jocks passed by and whistled at her. She offered them a flirty smile as was customary from the girls on the squad, but that was all they had ever gotten or would ever get out of her. She had made that much very clear on more than one occasion.

She wore a silky crimson button-up over a black cami, the colors perfectly complementing the dark wash of her hair. Regina stared at her ponytail in the mirror for a few moments before scoffing and yanking the band from her hair. It cascaded in dark waves around her shoulders, all body and volume with no needed help from product. She ran her hands through it a few times, fussing over the thick mane. After a moment, she scoffed and began gathering it in her hands to pull it up again.

Just as she was about to band it again, though, a familiar face shot by her in the hallway. Regina dropped her hair as she whipped around and saw Emma Swan's back disappearing around the corner. It seemed that the blonde had been deliberately trying to avoid being seen by her.

Regina groaned and rested her forehead against the inside of her locker door. In that moment, she wanted to climb inside her locker, close the door, and just disappear from Storybrooke High for the day. Instead, though, she grabbed her books for first period, closed her locker, and took off down the hall before any of her friends had even arrived.

Conveniently, Emma's locker was on the way to Regina's first period class. She didn't know which specific locker belonged to the nerd, but she knew that Emma's locker was in the hallway that most of the popular kids referred to as "Loser Lane" because a lot of the academia and quiz-bowl nerds had chosen lockers in that hallway.

She could only hope that Emma was still at her locker. There was still a full ten minutes before classes even began, but Regina knew that most of the nerds were glued to their seats well before first bell. She let out a breath of relief when she turned the corner and saw Emma's blonde ponytail, large black scrunchie, and thick black-rimmed glasses before the girl's face disappeared behind the open door of a locker.

Regina glanced quickly around to see that but for a few students whose names she didn't even know, the hallway was mostly still deserted. Other than the nerds and jocks, not many students showed up to school early. Most of the nerds did because they did a lot of tutoring and club meetings before classes, and the jocks did because they typically either had early practices or arrived early to deposit their changes of clothes in their respective locker rooms for after-school conditioning.

Regina shot quickly down the hall, her gaze focused on Emma. She stopped just on the other side of Emma's open locker door and cleared her throat. A moment later, Emma's face popped out from behind the door, brows furrowed, and then those emerald eyes of hers widened considerably. She was completely shocked to find the most popular girl in school actually standing, stationary, at her locker with the very clear intention of speaking to her.

Emma glanced around the hallway, still unable to believe that this was happening, before looking back at Regina and saying, "Someone could see you, you know."

Regina gulped, her own gaze darting quickly around. "I don't care," she choked out. That was a lie. Still, she tried to make it at least *sound* like it was the truth.

Emma didn't buy it. "I'm pretty sure that you do," the blonde argued.

Regina huffed out a breath and shuffled from one foot to the other. "Okay, so I do, but I'm here anyway, aren't I?"

A smile slowly began to form over Emma's soft features. Her green eyes practically sparkled as she let out a chuckling sigh and said, "Yeah. I suppose you are."

Emma shut her locker and leaned against it, clutching her math book over a plain black v-neck t-shirt. Her jeans were baggy, and her black converse were ratty and worn, but Regina thought the girl looked incredibly cute. Her eyes scanned up and down Emma's figure several times before the blonde

cleared her throat, and Regina's entire face flooded crimson as her chocolate eyes snapped back up to Emma's face.

Regina bit her lip and looked almost pleadingly at the blonde as Emma dropped her smile and asked, "Did you want something, Regina?"

"I..." Regina hesitated, unsure of what she wanted to say. She honestly didn't even know why she was standing at Emma Swan's locker in the first place. What had her purpose been in going there? What had been her plan? Had she even *had* a plan? The last ten minutes seemed like a whirlwind, and Regina's head swam dizzily as she attempted to contemplate it.

After a moment of toiling through her thoughts, Regina realized that she had nothing. No plan. No words. Nothing.

So, she just cleared her throat, smiled awkwardly, and said the first thing that came to her mind. "Your jeans are too big for you."

Emma gaped at her for a moment before snorting with laughter. "Duh," she said after a moment. "What did you *really* want?"

Regina bit her lip, her cheeks still a bright red as Emma smiled at her. She then let out a heavy breath, lowered her voice to a whisper, and said, "I *do* want to be friends." She bit her lip again and then added, "with you," just for clarification.

Emma's eyes widened just a bit before the blonde attempted to school her features. She didn't know whether to believe Regina or not. The girl seemed sincere, and if the extreme blushing and nervous fidgeting were anything to go by, Emma was fairly certain that Regina wasn't playing a prank on her. It seemed the girl was just a breath away from terrified, likely because her reputation would be on the line, but it meant something to Emma that Regina's feet remained rooted to the ground in front of her anyway, and willingly.

Regina, unnerved by the blonde's silence, tried again. She cleared her throat and practically hissed her next words. "I wasn't ignoring you last night. I had dinner with my parents. When I returned to my phone, it seemed you

had jumped to conclusions and gotten upset. I thought it best to wait and inform you in person that it was a misunderstanding so that you could see that I'm being genuine."

Understanding sank in and Emma felt like a real punk in that moment. Regina was right that she had jumped to conclusions, and now she felt foolish for doing so. Emma knew she was well-founded in thinking that Regina likely hadn't wanted friendship, because the nerd was so used to being mistreated by the popular kids, but she had also seen that Regina wasn't like the rest of them. The brunette was kind, even if she did hide it from everyone else, and Emma felt a little ashamed of herself for having lumped Regina in with the rest of the jocks.

Emma swallowed thickly as she nodded. "Oh," she said simply.

Regina nodded in return, looking highly uncomfortable as she glanced around the hallway again. Any minute, Kathryn Nolan would come walking around that corner and see her standing there chatting with their class's number-one target, and then...well, Regina didn't even know *what* would happen, but she knew it wouldn't be good.

"Okay," Emma finally said after another moment of silence. "I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions. I guess I just assumed that you..."

"I know," Regina interjected, her tone soft and sad. "You were wrong, though."

Emma smiled softly at her, her cheeks tinting a light pink. "So I was," she agreed. She then glanced up at the clock on the wall, and realized the time.

"I had better get to class," the blonde said then, and Regina nodded frantically.

"I had better go as well."

"Okay."

They both lingered for another moment, just staring at one another, and then Emma smiled shyly, turned on her heel and darted away. Regina let out a breath that she hadn't even realized she had been holding, and her own smile tugged at her lips and at her heart. She glanced over her shoulder quickly before taking off down the hallway, thanking every god she could think of that Kathryn had chosen this day to drag her feet.

As she made her way to her first-period class, she felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. Regina pulled it from her pocket and checked to find a text from the girl she had only just parted ways with. Her heart began to race as she pressed to open the message.

You should wear your hair down more often.

Regina bit her lip around a smile, her entire body electric in that moment. She then shoved her phone back in her pocket and practically skipped the rest of the way to class.

Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

While her Spanish teacher droned on about verb conjugation, Regina tapped her fingers lightly against her desk with her left hand as her right took to drawing doodles around the few notes she had taken. She rarely paid attention in this class given that she was already fluent in Spanish. It was an easy A, though, and the rest of Regina's coursework was rather heavy; thus, she had opted to take the class as a bit of a break from the heavier stuff. It didn't hurt, either, that foreign language studies looked excellent on a college application (as her mother had reiterated countless times since Regina's freshman year).

When the teacher turned her back, Regina felt something smack lightly against the back of her head. The cheerleader instantly whipped around in her chair, her signature fiery glare already blazing, and locked gazes with David Nolan.

The cocky jock grinned at her and pointed toward the ground. Regina looked down to see that what had hit her in the back of the head was a wadded up piece of paper that now sat in a ball by the back right leg of her chair. She bent swiftly and scooped it up, rolling her eyes. She shot another glare at Kathryn's ridiculous brother before turning back in her seat to face the front of the classroom.

Regina unfolded the wadded paper as quietly and quickly as she could to find a sloppily written note inside it.

Meet me on the field before practice. -D

Regina didn't know why but she found the note unsettling. She and David were good friends. He was Kathryn's twin brother after all, and she had been friends with Kathryn since they were all in diapers. So, it wasn't like she was unaccustomed to spending time with the boy or even to passing notes with him. He was cocky in front of the other jocks, but for the most

part, he was a fairly down-to-earth guy, and Regina got along with him well.

So, Regina didn't understand the feeling-the discomfort. Still, it was there. It swirled in her gut and made her wary of agreeing to meet up with the boy. What did he want to talk to her about?

Her mind instantly flashed back to that morning, to her little exchange with Emma Swan. Regina's heart began to race. She had thought the hall to be empty but for a few no-names, but maybe she had overlooked someone. Had David seen?

Maybe she was just being paranoid. Surely he just wanted to talk to her about the upcoming game. The cheerleaders were set to do a dance routine during halftime, so maybe he needed to ask her something pertaining to that. Or maybe...

Regina shook her head quickly, shaking away the swirling thoughts plaguing her mind. It wouldn't do to dwell on it.

Regina waited for the teacher to turn her back again before looking over her shoulder and nodding subtly to David, agreeing to meet him after school before their respective practices. She could only hope that it was nothing to be concerned about.

The breeze felt a little too cool as Regina made her way toward the edge of the field, her cheerleading skirt leaving her long toned legs entirely bare to its assault. Her quick steps bounced in the springy grass, causing her high ponytail to swish from side to side. Her heart rate quickened as she saw David up ahead, already waiting for her.

Regina's hands remained planted firmly on her hips as she stepped up to the boy, her blue, silver, and white cheerleading uniform matching his own football gear. He grinned at her, and she did her best to return the smile.

"Hey Regina," he said. "Thanks for meeting me."

"Of course," Regina replied with a tilt of her head. "Is everything okay? I assume this has something to do with the game tomorrow night?"

David's brows furrowed for a moment before his expression leveled with understanding. "Oh, right, the dance you guys are doing. No, I'm pretty sure everything is good to go for you all on that front. Coach had the sound system checked and everything."

"Oh, okay then," Regina replied, and though her expression remained cool, her pulse only quickened. She could think of nothing else that David could possibly want to speak with her about, and then the racing muscle plummeted into her stomach when his next words confirmed her earlier fear.

"I actually wanted to talk to you about that Swan girl," he told her, and Regina had to swallow roughly to keep from choking.

She paused, doing her best to appear confused as if she didn't instantly know who he was talking about. He seemed to buy it, because he chuckled at her expression and further clarified.

"Swan," he said again. "*Emma* Swan. She's like number one in our class or whatever."

"Oh yes, right," Regina said, keeping her voice as even as possible despite the fact that she could practically feel her body quaking. "What about her?"

"Well, I saw you guys talking this morning," he said, and Regina was surprised to find that his tone wasn't mocking or teasing. Still, she felt sick to her stomach. What if he later teased her for it? What if he told everyone? What if he and his friends bullied Emma even more than usual?

Before Regina could splutter out any excuses or explanations, though, David said, "So, I was wondering if you could do me a favor?"

Confused, Regina managed to choke out her response. "A...a favor?"

"Yeah," he replied. "I know you and Emma aren't friends or anything. I just figured you were talking to her about some student council crap or tutoring or something, not that you would need it." Regina let her breath out in one long hiss, but David didn't even notice the way her entire body seemed to collapse with her relief. "Anyway, so since you can talk to her and everything, I was wondering if you could try to convince her to come to the game tomorrow night. Could you?"

Regina suddenly felt like the world was spinning too quickly. She shook her head to clear it out and held up a hand. "Wait, wait," she said, shaking her head again. "You want me to convince Emma Swan to come to the game tomorrow night?"

"Well yeah," he told her, nodding. "I'd ask her myself, but she'd probably just say no since she doesn't really know me, and most of the guys pick on her and stuff. Besides, you know the other guys would give me shit for talking to her, but *you* have a good excuse to talk to her, so she'd probably listen to you. Right?"

"I..." Regina was terribly confused. Why in the hell would David Nolan want Emma Swan to attend his game? Regina shook her head gently once more. She felt as if the entire world had suddenly tilted on its axis and everything was distorted to the point that nothing made sense. Was she suddenly in an alternate universe?

Too many horrible scenarios flitted through Regina's mind in that moment, scenarios of David and his friends pranking the nerdy girl or humiliating her, and a surge of protectiveness blasted through Regina's chest. Her expression hardened and turned cold as she asked, "Why are you suddenly so intent on having Emma Swan at the game?"

David chuckled lightly. "Well," he said, glancing around quickly, "I'm not. I'm doing this for Neal."

"Neal?" Regina asked, brows furrowing. Neal was a good friend of David's and yet another jock. Regina had never spoken much with him despite the many times he had tried. She found his voice annoying and the peach-fuzz on his face that he refused to shave positively repulsive.

David merely nodded, so Regina huffed out an annoyed, impatient breath. "Elaborate," she demanded. "If you expect me to do you a favor, which would actually be me doing *Neal* a favor, apparently, then I require details. I won't lead a girl into a situation to be bullied, David."

"Oh no, no," David said quickly, shaking his head. "It's not like that. I swear. Neal actually *likes* her, like...*likes* her. That's why he wants her to come to the game tomorrow. I think he wants to impress her or something."

"Neal," Regina said plainly, her expression a mixture of confusion, disbelief, and disgust. "*Neal Cassidy* is actually *interested* in Emma Swan. This is what you're telling me right now?"

"Yeah," David laughed out. "He totally is. I thought it was weird too, but he said that he's always been 'into smart chicks'."

Regina's face scrunched. "He's never even met her, has he?"

"Nope," David told her, grinning. "He just sees her in the hall a lot, and she's in one of his classes or something. Anyway, I owe him a favor and he's cashing in. That's what he asked me for...to get her to come to the game, but I've never really talked to her either. Then I saw *you* talking to her this morning, so I figured since *you* owe *me* a favor, then you might be willing to do this for me."

"Since when do I owe you a favor?" Regina asked, and she hated the way her stomach swirled, nauseated, as she thought of Neal Cassidy crushing on Emma. The sick swirling only intensified as she pondered if Emma could actually return his feelings once made aware of them. Oh god.

"Since last summer," he answered, raising his eyebrows. "Remember? You got totally wasted at me and Kat's party when Mom and Dad were out of town, and then we all played 7 Minutes in Heaven, and you and me ended up in the closet together?"

"Oh," Regina nearly whispered, her cheeks flushing a soft pink. "Right."

"Yeah," David said, smiling. "I never told anyone what you confessed to me in the closet that night, okay? I *won't* tell anyone either, because I don't think it's anyone's business, not even Kathryn's, so this isn't an ultimatum or anything. I just would appreciate it if you could do this for me as like...I don't know...a thank you, or something?"

Regina swallowed thickly, her gaze latching onto the ground in front of her feet. She couldn't meet David's eyes in that moment. She barely remembered that ridiculous party other than the fact that it had begun with Kathryn shoveling shots down her throat and had ended with her and David in a closet together, him trying to kiss her, and her drunkenly confessing that she believed she was gay and didn't want to kiss him. He'd been shockingly cool about it, saying that it was totally fine with him and that he really hadn't wanted to kiss her anyway because it would have felt like kissing his sister. It had actually strengthened their friendship, and Regina was still surprised that he had never betrayed her by telling everyone. He was still the only person she had ever told.

Sighing, Regina nodded against her chest before straightening her spine and meeting David's gaze once more. "All I have to do is ask her to come to the game?" she asked, voice softer and a bit more timid.

"Yeah, totally," he replied quickly, nodding. "Neal said that he would take it from there."

Regina sighed as she nodded again, agreeing. "But she won't be interested," she said, rolling her eyes and turning to walk away.

She better not be interested, she thought, her heart racing again.

David laughed as he ran to catch up to her. He slung an arm around her shoulder, and Regina sighed as she wrapped her own arm around his waist. "I know," he agreed with her, laughing, "but he thinks he's got a chance. I just figured I'd let him find out on his own that he doesn't."

As they walked toward the school to meet up with their respective teams, David squeezed Regina's shoulders and lowered his voice as he said, "Besides, with the way she dresses and stuff, I always figured she was gay."

Regina's eyes practically jumped out of her skull as she snapped her head up and looked at him. He grinned knowingly at her, but then he just bumped her playfully, said, "Love ya, kid," and ran off toward the locker rooms. Regina watched him go, unable to slow her heart or stop her smile.

Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

Regina was the last one out after cheerleading practice, having taken an extra-long hot shower in the locker room. It had been nice to just let herself relax beneath the scalding stream and let all her worries and concerns leak away. By the time she had finished up in the showers and dressed herself again, the other girls had already gone, and she had a text from Kathryn telling her to call her later that night.

Regina made her way out of the silent school, but for a few remaining teachers, and out into the quad. She had actually driven to school that day since she had finally gotten her car out of the shop after the little fender bender Kathryn had gotten them in a month earlier when Regina had let the other girl drive the car. There hadn't been much damage, but Michael at the body shop had apparently had to order a part in for her car since it was a foreign make and he didn't have any in the shop. That had resulted in a lot of walking to school, her mother dropping her off, or Kathryn and David picking her up in David's truck.

She was glad to have her own vehicle back. Her car was a sort of haven for her, almost like a second bedroom. She was excited to just be able to go for little drives again to clear her head. In fact, she thought she might take one that night if her mother allowed her out.

"Hey Regina."

Regina's head snapped up from where her eyes had been fixed on the ground as she had absentmindedly made her way toward the parking lot. She was completely surprised to see Emma Swan leaning against the pole of one of the tall lamps in the parking lot, her face scrunched up as she squinted in the waning sunlight.

"Emma," she said, her surprise evident in her tone. "What are you still doing here?"

"Waiting for you," Emma said, shrugging her shoulders. She then chuckled and scratched at the back of her neck. "I stayed behind to talk to Ms. Blue about a student she wants me to tutor. I caught sight of the cheerleaders out of her office window when they were all leaving, but I didn't see you, and then your car was still here when I was done, so I figured I'd just wait up. Is that...is that alright?"

Regina's heart fluttered wildly as a small smile pulled at her lips. "Yes," she answered, nodding. She was feeling slightly more confident since her talk with David, as if perhaps things wouldn't explode as epically as she had first imagined they would if she tried to pursue something with Emma Swan. *Maybe.* Regina smiled teasingly at Emma as she stepped over to the girl and asked, "So, you know what my car looks like?"

"Uh..." Emma hesitated for a moment, biting her bottom lip, before asking, "Doesn't everyone?"

Regina chuckled then as they both turned to cross the lot to where her car was parked. "I suppose that it's likely, yes. Why did you want to wait for me?"

"Well, we're friends, right?" Emma asked her, and Regina didn't miss the hopeful expression that she caught in her peripherals. It made her stomach flip pleasantly. "I mean, we're *becoming* friends, right?"

Regina grinned like a giddy little girl. "We are," she agreed. "And friends wait for one another after their respective practices?"

"They do now, I guess," Emma laughed out.

When they reached Regina's car, they both just sort of hovered beside the driver's door, staring at one another and awkwardly shifting from foot to foot.

"Emma--"

"Can I--"

They both stopped, having attempted to speak at the same time, and laughed softly. Their cheeks were rosy as they looked at one another, and Emma sweetly said, "Go ahead."

"No, no," Regina told her, shaking her head. "What were you going to say?"

Emma's blush only seemed to deepen then as she cleared her throat and nodded. "I was just wondering if there's something going on between you and David Nolan?"

That question completely took Regina by surprise. Her brows furrowed for a moment and Emma quickly jumped in again to clarify.

"I mean, are you two a couple?" she asked.

Regina's eyes widened as she quickly shook her head in response. "No," she answered. "We are *not* a couple."

"Oh," Emma said then, and Regina's heart practically leapt into her throat as she saw the other girl's body relax as the blonde let out a sigh that sounded nothing if not relieving. Was she jealous? *Was Emma JEALOUS?!* Regina's head swam with the idea. Was it possible that Emma was interested in her?

Relax Regina, she told herself. *You are getting way ahead of yourself. Maybe she's just trying to make conversation or something. Maybe she's just curious. Maybe she wants to kiss you, too. Christ! There you go again.*

"Well, I only asked because I've noticed that you rode to school with him a few times recently and then I saw you guys together out on the field today when I was going to Ms. Blue's office." Her cheeks then burned brightly again as she quickly added, "Not that it's any of my business. I know that it's not. I'm not trying to pry or anything. I just thought that since you said you wanted to be friends with me, that it would be okay for me to ask, but if you want me to butt out, you can just tell me, and I will. It's no big d--"

"Emma!" Regina suddenly snapped, chuckling as she reached out without thinking and placed a calming hand on Emma's upper arm. "You are rambling. Relax."

"Right," Emma said, laughing awkwardly at herself as she shifted from foot to foot. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Regina assured her, and they both smiled softly at one another. "You can ask me anything you like. I can't promise that I will always have a good answer or an answer at all, but you are welcome to ask regardless. David and Kathryn are like siblings to me, and that is all."

Emma's smile grew as she nodded. "Okay. Cool."

They stood there silently another moment, and Regina knew she needed to get going, but she didn't want to leave the other girl. So, in an effort to spend some extra time with Emma, Regina pointed behind her to her car and asked, "Would you like a ride home?"

There was complete silence in the car as Regina drove them out of the school parking lot, her heart pounding. There was a question burning in her throat that she was dying to ask Emma, but she was a bit nervous to do so. Then again, Emma had asked her something quite similar, so why not?

"So," she began, and the word sounded annoyingly strangled. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Are *you* seeing anyone?"

"Huh?" Emma asked, turning to face her from the passenger seat.

"Are you *seeing* anyone?" Regina repeated.

"Oh." Emma laughed. "No. I'm not."

Regina couldn't help the little smile that danced on her lips, but then Emma laughed again and added, "Not that that's surprising."

"What do you mean?" Regina asked, looking over to see the nerdy blonde roll her eyes in response.

"Oh come on," Emma drawled. "You had to have noticed that I'm one of the biggest loners at our school by now, right?"

Regina definitely *had* noticed that Emma seemed to always be alone, but surely the girl had *some* friends. Right?

"It hasn't escaped me, no," Regina replied softly.

"Yeah, well, that's because I don't really have any friends here at school," Emma told her. "I had a couple of friends back in Boston, but we lost touch after like the first year that I was here in Maine. It's only a four-hour drive, but I don't have a car or anything, and like I said, I don't talk to them much anymore anyway."

Regina's chest ached as she glanced over at Emma again to see the blonde now gazing out of the passenger-side window. "You don't have *any* friends here?" Regina asked, hoping that the girl had at least one.

"Just two," Emma told her, "unless my foster mom counts. She's pretty cool sometimes."

Regina smiled at that. "Who are the others?"

"Well, I'm pretty good friends with this girl, Belle, but she doesn't go to Storybrooke High," Emma explained. "She graduated like three years ago or something, I think. She works at the town library. Do you know her?"

"I do," Regina answered, nodding as she turned onto the road that would lead them into the poorer side of Storybrooke. "Well, I know *of* her," she then amended. "I used to see her in the hallways at school when I was a freshman, but I've not spent much time at the town library, so I've never actually spoken to her."

"She's pretty great," Emma told her, turning to smile at Regina. "Wicked smart. I met her not too long after I moved here. I like books, so I've spent a lot of time in the library, and we just sort of became friends."

"I see," Regina replied. "And the other?"

"The other what?" Emma asked, confused.

"You said you had two friends," Regina clarified. "Belle is one, and who is the other?"

"Oh," Emma said, chuckling. "You."

Regina felt like she was on cloud nine with that one simple word. She smiled even as she rolled her eyes at the way Emma teasingly poked her shoulder from the passenger seat. "Lucky you," the cheerleader joked. She then glanced over at Emma once more and asked, "But no boyfriend?"

"Nope," Emma answered with a smack of her lips. "I'm not into boys."

That one threw Regina for a loop. She was caught so off guard, in fact, that she momentarily lost control of the car as her head snapped to the right to look at Emma. The car swerved gently, and Emma quickly reached over to grab the wheel and steady it.

"Whoa," the blonde said, and Regina snapped back into action. She smacked playfully at Emma's hands before taking control of the car again. Emma just laughed as she settled back into the passenger seat and said, "Note to self: don't tell someone you're gay when said someone is driving."

Regina practically bit through her tongue as she held her breath and drove them the remaining block in silence. She pulled up in front of Emma's house and parked the car. She then unbuckled her seatbelt and turned to face the nerdy blonde.

"You're gay?" she blurted.

"Yup," Emma told her. "You waited a whole block to ask me that?"

Regina rolled her eyes and waved off the question. "Does anyone at school know?"

"No, I don't think so," Emma answered simply, shrugging, "but then no one really talks to me, so it's not like I've had an opportunity to tell anyone."

"But you *would* tell someone?" Regina asked her, heart still racing. "If someone asked you, you would tell them?"

Emma nodded. "Sure. Why not?"

"You aren't afraid of what people would think?"

Emma shrugged again. "You *do* know that Maine has marriage equality, right? I figured it wouldn't be a big deal if people knew, because obviously the majority of the state doesn't have a problem wi--"

"But this is a small town," Regina interjected, "a small, *conservative* town."

"Look, Regina," Emma said, sighing, "is this a problem for you or something? I didn't think it would be an issue, but if you can't be friends with me because I'm gay, then--"

"No!" Regina said quickly. "No, Emma, no. I don't have an issue with your sexuality. I was simply curious. I apologize for the questions."

"You don't have to apologize," Emma told her. "You just seemed a little flustered, so I thought it might be a problem."

"No, no problem," Regina reassured her. Her entire body felt light as a feather now that she had learned of Emma's sexuality. *Neal Cassidy,* she thought with a wicked grin, *eat your friggin' heart out. The girl is mine.*

They sat across from one another a moment longer, just staring before laughing softly and awkwardly together. Regina bit her lip a moment as she locked gazes with Emma, and then she simply blurted out her next question. "Will you come to the game tomorrow night?"

Emma's eyes widened at that, but then her face practically exploded into a brilliant smile. "You want me to come to your game tomorrow?"

Regina's cheeks flushed as she nodded. "I do."

"For the game?" Emma asked. She then quirked a brow and boldly added, "Or for *you*?"

Regina's face felt like it was on fire as she swallowed thickly and said, "Whichever offers the most incentive."

Emma grinned as she opened the passenger door and stepped out, pulling her bag with her. She leaned down and poked her head back in to lock gazes with Regina as she said, "The latter." She then winked at Regina in a way that made the cheerleader's entire body vibrate, thanked her for the ride, and bid her a goodnight before closing the passenger door and making her way toward her small house.

Regina watched her go, throat dry and pulse bouncing rapidly. She closed her eyes to gather herself before driving home, and smiled as she shook her head and muttered under her breath, "Nerds."

Chapter 12

A/N: Sorry about the delay, friends. I've been spending time with family, celebrating pride, and the fourth. Thank you all for the wonderful reviews and support for this story. I hope you all enjoy this new chapter. XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Twelve

Emma walked through the front door in a haze, her thoughts occupied by all things Regina Mills. A smile tugged at her lips as she turned back quickly once inside the door to see Regina's black car pulling away from the curb. She closed the door after a moment and leaned against it, grinning to herself.

"Well shit," a voice laughed out. "Who buttered your biscuit, Swan?"

Emma jumped at the sound of the voice. She had been completely oblivious to the two people watching her from the kitchen as she had come inside, practically spewing girlish giddiness. It definitely wasn't her style, so Emma wasn't surprised to find two sincerely confused expressions facing her when she looked up.

As was typical a few days a week, Ruby Lucas sat at the shaky kitchen table, all in black and smoking a menthol cigarette. Sitting near her in the only other chair was Emma's foster mother, if one could really call her that. She was barely six years older than Emma, so it wasn't like she could actually be the blonde's mother. No, Mary Margaret Blanchard was more like an older sister, really, considering she was only twenty-three. She was pretty great, though, if not a little goody-goody at times. She was kind and funny, too, and she treated Emma really well.

When Emma had first met her as a potential, she had assumed that the woman just really needed the assistance check from the government, given how young she was, and that that was why she had decided to foster. Getting to know her, though, Emma had quickly discovered that Mary

Margaret's soul was as old as her name sounded. She was definitely the mothering type, even if it was a little weird given that they weren't too far apart in age.

Emma had even asked her at one point why she had wanted to take in a kid as old as her instead of a toddler. Mary Margaret had simply said that a person who needed love was a person who needed love, no matter the age, and that sometimes the older a person got, the harder it was for that person to find the love they needed.

Those words had stayed with Emma ever since.

"Oh," Emma said, clearing her throat and smiling awkwardly at the two women. "Hey guys."

"So?" Ruby asked, her ice blue eyes blinking from beneath an obscene amount of black eyeliner. Her red-streaked, dark hair hung around her face, and her black-gloved fingers flicked at the butt of her cigarette. The ash hit the table, and the woman next to her bumped her elbow.

"In the ashtray, Ruby," she scolded. "You're lucky I let you smoke in here at all."

"Yeah, yeah, MM," Ruby said, chuckling. "You love me." She grabbed the ashtray and pulled it a little closer before leaning down to blow her ashes off the table.

Emma rolled her eyes as she walked over, grabbing a stool they often used as a third chair sometimes, and pulling it to the table. She plopped down and asked, "So what?"

Ruby opened her mouth to reply, but Emma quickly held up a hand to stop her. "And don't say anything about 'butter' or 'biscuits'."

Ruby chuckled. "It's a metaphor, nerd."

"It's dumb," Emma told her, laughing. She and Ruby got along well enough, but they weren't really what Emma would call 'friends'. As incredibly

different as they were, Ruby was more friends with Mary Margaret. It was the oddest thing to see the two of them together, what with Ruby's streaked hair, all-black skimpy clothes, and ton of makeup and Mary Margaret's grandma sweaters, pixie cut, and high-waist jeans. Regardless, they were the best of friends.

Apparently Mary Margaret had babysat Ruby a bit when they were younger and they had become close. That was long before Ruby's affinity for next-to-nothing clothes and cigarettes made its debut. Mary Margaret never judged her though. She seemed to love her just the same, even if she did turn her nose up at the smoking from time to time.

"You *did* seem rather happy, Em," Mary Margaret said, smiling softly at the blonde. "You don't smile like that too often."

"Yeah, well, maybe something good happened to me today," Emma told them, shrugging.

"Oh yeah?" Ruby asked. "Like making good with the popular kids?"

Emma's head snapped up, eyes wide. "What do you mean?"

Ruby took a long drag off her cigarette and watched Emma carefully. "Well, that *was* Regina Mills that dropped you off, right?"

Emma swallowed thickly. "Um..."

"Regina Mills?" Mary Margaret asked. "Cora Mills' daughter? I didn't know you were friends with her."

"She's not," Ruby interjected. "At least, she wasn't before. Pretty sure that the rumor mill would be all over that at school. So...what gives, Emma?"

Emma's stomach churned uncomfortably. "I'm tutoring her," she finally thought to say after a moment.

"Oh, I see," Mary Margaret said, nodding. "Is it going well? Is she nice to you? Because she had better be nice to you."

Emma smiled softly. It was funny when Mary Margaret got all protective like that, but it also made Emma feel warm and fuzzy inside. Someone loved her, even if they never really said those words to one another. Mary Margaret had said them a few times, but it was rare, and Emma assumed it was because she had always acted kind of weird about it. It was still nice to hear from time to time, though, especially when she knew it was true coming from the woman across from her.

"Yeah, MM," she said, chuckling. "She's nice to me, and tutoring is good."

"Yeah, I'm sure it is," Ruby interjected again, smirking knowingly, "given that Regina Mills is fourth in our class. She's an A-student. She needs tutoring like I need a kick in the ass, and let me tell you, Em, I don't need a kick in the ass."

"I would argue that you do," Mary Margaret joked, and Ruby elbowed her gently in response.

Emma, though, was silent. Ruby's words sank in, echoing through her mind over and over. Why had she not thought to check the class ranking herself to see if Regina's request for tutoring had been genuine? The cheerleader had just been so sweet to her. Regina had seemed so sincere.

Why would she...

She lied.

Mary Margaret had agreed to let Ruby crash with her and Emma that night, which wasn't all that surprising given that Ruby typically stayed with them a night or two every week. Her parents were both gone, so Ruby lived with her grandmother, who ran the local diner. Ruby liked to get out of her Granny's hair a few nights a week, because the woman was often stressed and tired.

So, she stayed with Mary Margaret, which was a little weird for Emma when she had first moved in with MM, but she and Ruby had quickly learned to get along. They never really hung out since Ruby only came

around when Mary Margaret was there, and they didn't talk at school either, but they were basically cool with one another.

Mary Margaret headed up to bed pretty early since it was a weeknight. She taught second grade, and she liked to be at the school an hour or so before first bell. She would likely be gone before Emma and Ruby even got up, as usual. She also stayed after school on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays to lead a special-needs program she had started a couple years prior when she was fresh out of college and back in Storybrooke to start teaching. That meant that she wouldn't be home until around 5:30 or so the next night.

Emma had smiled softly when Mary Margaret had pressed a kiss to her forehead before heading up to bed, but as soon as the woman was up the stairs and out of sight, the nerdy blonde had grabbed Ruby by the arm. She pulled the brunette off the couch and out onto the front porch.

"Whoa, whoa," Ruby said as Emma pulled her outside. "What's your deal?"

Emma whirled on her, her heart pounding. "Were you being serious about Regina being fourth in our class?"

Ruby smirked and pulled her pack from her pocket. She slipped two cigarettes from the pack, stuck one in her mouth, and offered the other to Emma. She knew that the other girl liked the taste every once in a while.

Emma took the cigarette, tucked it between her teeth, and let Ruby light it for her. "So?" she asked impatiently as she huffed out a small cloud of smoke.

Ruby dropped down on the porch step, and Emma sat down beside her. "Yeah," Ruby told her. "How do *you* not know this? I thought all you nerds were constantly checking the ranking and stuff."

"I used to," Emma admitted, "but it's been months, ever since Ms. Blue assured me that I had a large enough lead that there was no way I wouldn't be valedictorian. I haven't checked it since, and even when I was checking it all the time, I never really paid attention to anything other than the first and second positions."

"Well, she's fourth," Ruby told her. "I know because I'm fifth."

Emma's stomach churned uncomfortably, just as it had earlier in the kitchen. "Why would she lie to me?"

"I don't know, Em," Ruby said, exhaling her smoke in a sigh, "but I'm guessing it's not good. You know who her best friend is. Kathryn loves to fuck with people. She probably put Regina up to pranking you or something."

"But she's so nice to me," Emma said softly.

"Okay," Ruby said, shrugging, "then maybe she really likes you."

Emma looked up at her then. "Do you think she really might?"

"No," Ruby answered honestly, "but I hope for your sake that she really does, because I've been on the receiving end of the cheerleaders' shit before, and it's not a pleasant experience."

Emma sighed, closing her eyes. She couldn't believe that Regina would be so cruel to her. No, she couldn't believe it. She *wouldn't*. There had been truth in Regina's eyes when the cheerleader had told her that she'd wanted to be friends. It had been genuine. Emma was so sure of it.

But then, why had Regina lied to her?

"Hey."

Emma opened her eyes again to see Ruby looking at her, almost affectionately. "Yeah?" the blonde whispered, her voice strained.

"I just..." Ruby hesitated. "Look, I know we're not tight, you and me. We aren't the best of friends despite two damn years of being around each other, and I guess that's maybe my fault. I've never tried to really be your friend, because I was jealous, okay? It's always just kind of been me and MM, and then you came along, and I felt like I had competition. She's my *best* friend."

Emma was surprised by the confession. She had always thought Ruby had something against her, even if the other girl never open acted like she did, and now she was having that thought confirmed by the girl herself. It was definitely surprising. She could understand it though.

Being in the system, it was hard to make connections, and so when you did, you naturally hated anything that might threaten that connection. Emma figured it was the same for Ruby. She was an orphan too, even if she had never been in the system like Emma had. She still had to have struggled, wanting those connections as much as Emma did.

"Ruby--"

"No, wait," Ruby said, cutting Emma off. "Let me finish."

Emma nodded, and Ruby let out a soft sigh.

"I'm sorry I never tried to be a better friend to you, or really a friend at all," Ruby told her. "I respect that you're important to MM, and so I guess, in a way, you're important to me too, even though I've never really acted like it." She huffed out a breath, rolling her eyes at herself, and Emma couldn't help her small smile.

"I guess what I'm trying to say," Ruby continued, "is that if those girls are fucking with you, I've got your back."

Emma's smile grew a bit as she nodded. She took another drag from the cigarette Ruby had given her, and as she exhaled in a white cloud, she leaned over and bumped Ruby's shoulder with hers.

It looked like she had one more friend than she had thought.

Chapter 13

Chapter Thirteen

Regina only saw Emma twice the next day at school. As usual, the cheerleader had been unable to stop glancing her way throughout science class. She was surprised, though, to find that Emma did not return her stare once the entire period. Typically, even before they began speaking to one another, Emma often glanced her way and offered her a small smile or a blush or a small nod, but today, there was nothing.

She thought it strange and a little disheartening, but Regina merely shrugged it off. They had just begun studying the last chapters before third-quarter finals, so perhaps Emma simply wanted to be diligent so as to be better prepared for their upcoming exam. Surely that was the reason.

The second time Regina saw her, though, was during lunch period, and that encounter put the cheerleader a little more on edge. Emma never sat anywhere near the cheerleaders during lunch. Instead, the blonde usually occupied a small round table in the back corner of the cafeteria either by herself or with a few other kids, mostly student tutors or debate-team nerds. She never seemed to really talk to any of them, though.

Today, though, Regina only glanced Emma coming into the cafeteria before the blonde disappeared into the restroom. Taking a chance, Regina slipped from her seat at the cheerleaders' table.

"Where are you going?" Kathryn asked.

"Restroom," Regina muttered, offering the others a tight smile, before taking off in that direction.

When she stepped into the restroom, Regina rolled her eyes at the fact that there were two other girls in the room besides herself and Emma Swan. The girls lingered around the sinks, giggling and gossiping about something Regina couldn't care less about.

Regina could see Emma's dirty converse under the closed door of the far stall, but none of the others seemed to be occupied, and she *really* wanted to talk to Emma even if it was only for a second.

She cleared her throat to capture the attention of the girls at the sink, and when they turned to see her standing just inside the doorway, Regina merely arched a brow at them and motioned toward the door.

The girls immediately scampered toward the door, though they didn't bother hiding their annoyed expressions as they went. Still, they didn't dare challenge the head cheerleader.

As soon as they were gone, Regina stepped over to the sinks, leaned up against the wall, and waited for Emma to come out.

Several minutes passed and yet Emma remained in the stall. Regina sighed, starting to feel a little on edge.

"Have you fallen in or something?" the cheerleader finally asked aloud.

Regina heard Emma's soft gasp followed by the sound of the blonde's cell phone clattering to the floor. The small plastic device skidded across the floor, under the door of the stall, and out into the open area of the bathroom. Regina chuckled softly as she bent to scoop it up.

She glanced down at the phone as she picked it up. The screen was still lit up and showing an open text board, addressed to a 'Ruby'.

Regina scanned over the text Emma had apparently been in the process of writing, but she only managed to read *"Thanks for last night. I really..."* before Emma swung open the door of the stall and stepped out.

"Jesus, Regina," the blonde said, reaching out to snatch her phone from the cheerleader's hand. "You scared the crap out of me. What, were you just lingering silently outside the door?"

Regina was barely able to respond. Her stomach clenched painfully as the words she had just read in that text echoed in her mind over and over.

Thanks for last night.

What the hell did that mean?! And Ruby? Ruby who? Ruby *Lucas?* The goth Regina was unfortunately forced to sit with during science class?

Oh hell no. What had Emma been doing with *her* the previous night that required an expression of gratitude?

"Uh...okay," Emma muttered after a moment, having received nothing but silence from the cheerleader. "Guess I'll just be going then."

She started to leave then, which snapped Regina back into the moment. The brunette's hand shot out quickly and fastened around Emma's wrist to stop her from leaving.

"Wait," she said.

Emma turned back to her. "What?" she asked. "Did you need something from me?"

Regina's brows furrowed at that. "What is with the attitude?" she asked the blonde.

"Nothing," Emma snapped, shrugging. "What's with the grip on my arm?" She glanced pointedly toward her wrist, where Regina's hand was still wrapped around her, and then back up to the brunette's eyes.

Regina shook her head quickly and let go of Emma's arm. "Sorry," she muttered quietly.

Emma just nodded and turned to leave again.

"Ruby Lucas?" Regina asked just before Emma reached the door.

The blonde stopped and turned to look back at her, face scrunched in confusion. It dawned on her a moment later, and she glanced down at her

phone in her hand before looking back up at Regina. "Really?" Emma asked. "You read my messages?"

Regina felt extremely uncomfortable in that moment. She shifted from foot to foot as she explained, "I didn't mean to. I glanced at your phone as I picked it up. I saw the message you were typing."

Emma simply shook her head. "Whatever," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

"So, it *was* Ruby Lucas?" Regina asked.

"Yeah," Emma answered. "So?"

"So, what were you thanking her for?" Regina asked her, unable to keep the edge of jealousy from her voice. "Were you *with* her last night?"

"Yeah," Emma said again. "Is that a problem?"

"Are you *sleeping* with her?" Regina asked, and Emma's head swam dizzily as she realized that Regina Mills was terribly jealous in that moment.

"Why?" Emma asked, wanting to hear Regina admit it. "Are you jealous?"

"Answer the question," Regina demanded.

"*You* answer the question," Emma countered.

Regina threw up her hands as she let out a frustrated sigh that bordered more on a growl. "Fine," she bit out. "Don't tell me."

"Okay," Emma snapped. "I won't then."

They stared at one another for a long, heated moment, both sets of eyes hard and glaring, and then Regina huffed out a breath and marched toward the door. She shot Emma one last glare before yanking the door open and heading back out into the cafeteria.

Regina was in a truly foul mood as she threw her pom-poms and warm-ups into her cheer bag, along with some makeup, an extra ribbon for her hair just in case, and a few other random things. She packed everything in before moving over to her vanity to check her appearance one last time.

She smoothed her hands down the sides and front of her uniform and fluffed her skirt as she stared at her reflection. She wiped away a stray eyelash on her cheek before tightening her high ponytail and straightening the blue ribbon secured around it. She then hummed in satisfaction despite feeling like she just wanted to keel over on her bed and never leave, before turning to grab her bag and leaving.

Regina took the stairs at a near-sprint down to the foyer where her father was waiting.

"Ready to go, dear?" he asked his daughter, smiling down at her.

"Yes sir," she replied, nodding.

He grabbed his car keys and held the door open for her, and they made their way out to the car. Her father attended all of her games, even those in other towns and cities, and especially all of her tournaments. Her mother attended most of them as well, but she missed several each year also for business dinners and galas she often had to attend for her work. This was one of those nights.

Regina didn't mind, though. She loved her mother, but the woman wasn't very pleasant. She was judgmental and harsh, and despite a few shining moments she managed to have every once in a while, she mostly only ever had negative things to say or advice for improvement, whether they be directed at Regina or Regina's friends.

Though he was a stern and often serious man, her father was much more pleasant. He was always kind and gentle with Regina, even when Cora was piping hot and angry at her. He and Regina did not always see eye to eye on things, but for the most part, they had a decent relationship. Regina just wished he would stand up to her mother more.

The woman walked all over everyone.

As her father drove them to the school, Regina stared out her window. She no longer had any hope of seeing Emma at the game given what had happened earlier that day, and that reality made her bitter. She was upset, but she was also pissed the hell off.

Ruby Lucas. Seriously? *Ruby Lucas.*

Maybe she had read into it. Maybe Emma was just friends with the other girl. Maybe Emma could have just answered her damn question so that Regina would know once and for all and stop having an internal freaking meltdown over it!

"Something bothering you?"

Regina looked up and over at her father. "What?" she asked.

He smiled even as he kept his eyes on the road. "You're upset," he told her.

"No, I'm fine, Daddy," Regina replied, shaking her head.

Henry chuckled. "You were never a very good liar, dear."

Regina quirked a brow, because she would certainly beg to differ on that statement. She had lied through her teeth countless times to her parents, to her teachers, to the other kids at school, and not once had she ever been caught in a lie. So, Regina was fairly certain that she was a fantastic liar.

Not that that was anything to be proud of, she reminded herself. Then again, it had saved her from trouble many times, and she had never lied to intentionally hurt another person. Only to save herself. What was the harm in that?

"I'm just in a bad mood," she told him after a moment.

"I see," Henry said, nodding. "Is it anything you would like to talk about?"

Regina sighed and rested her head back against the seat. "No," she answered quietly, and her father seemed to accept that answer with nothing more than silence.

Regina fidgeted in her seat as thoughts of Emma swirled through her mind again. Her stomached clenched and her heart ached. She felt sick all over, and she hated that feeling.

A moment later, Regina huffed out a hard breath and asked, "Daddy, how do you feel about gay people?"

"Why do you ask?"

"No reason," Regina told him. "I'm just curious. We talked a bit about the marriage equality laws today at school is all."

Lying through her teeth again, and of course, her father bought it.

"I see," he said, nodding. "Well, I am in favor of equality, if that answers your question."

"So, you don't think it's wrong?"

"Not at all."

"What if someone close to you was gay?" Regina asked him. "That wouldn't bother you?"

"No, dear," Henry told her. "Would it bother *you*?"

"No," Regina answered, shaking her head.

The car pulled into the parking lot by the football field, and Henry turned back the key to shut the car off. He leaned back in his seat and glanced over at his daughter, who hadn't yet moved. "Well, I suppose we are in agreement then," he told her gently, chuckling.

Regina let out a smooth breath, feeling just the slightest bit better. "Yes we are," she agreed.

Henry smiled at her once more before leaving the car and making his way around to open the door for his daughter. She took his hand when he offered it and let him help her out of the car, even though she didn't need it. That was just how her father was, ever the gentleman, so she indulged him.

Regina slung her bag over her shoulder, but before she could head toward the school, her father pulled her into a warm hug.

"I love you, Regina," he said quietly, squeezing her.

Regina was surprised by the sudden show of affection, but she melted into her father's warm embrace anyway. "I love you too, Daddy," she told him, leaning up on her tiptoes to wrap her arms around his neck.

"No matter what," he added, and Regina's heart swelled.

They then made their way toward the field, Henry's arm slung around his daughter's shoulders, and Regina's mood rapidly improving.

Chapter 14

A/N: Here is a longer chapter to make up for the longer wait. Thankfully, I had plenty of drabble requests for this. I'm glad you are all enjoying the story, and I appreciate the support and reviews more than I can say! Enjoy! XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Fourteen

Emma sighed as she stared into the bathroom mirror. She had been toiling for two whole hours over whether or not she actually wanted to do this, but considering her hair was actually down for once and she had applied a lovely layer of makeup to her face *and* she had taken care to pick out an outfit that she thought accentuated her body well, it was fairly obvious that she *was,* in fact, doing this no matter how much it irked her. She rolled her eyes at her own dolled-up reflection before huffing out a breath and leaving the bathroom.

She made her way quickly downstairs, hoping to get out the door before...

"Hey."

Emma clenched her eyes closed for a moment. *Damn*, she thought, before spinning on her heel to face her foster mother. "Hey," she replied as Mary Margaret emerged a bit further from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

Mary Margaret smiled softly at her. "You look beautiful."

Her cheeks tinting a soft pink, Emma ducked her head. "Thanks."

"I take it you are going somewhere?" Mary Margaret asked.

"Yeah," Emma told her. "I thought I might go see the game tonight."

Mary Margaret's eyebrows rose at that. "The football game?" she asked. "Really?"

"Yeah," Emma answered, shrugging her shoulders. "I've never been to one, and this is...you know, my last year and all."

Smiling, Mary Margaret nodded. "I think that's wonderful, Emma," she said. "Are you going with any of your friends? Belle, perhaps?"

Emma bit her bottom lip as she shook her head. "Nope," she said, rocking back and forth on her heels. "I figured Belle wouldn't want to go since she's been out of high school for like three years now."

"Well, I've been out for quite some time myself," Mary Margaret chuckled, "but I will join you."

Emma just stared at her for a moment, and Mary Margaret's expression began to crumple as the pixie-haired woman quickly added, "...if you don't mind, of course."

Emma felt bad for her silence and the way it had made Mary Margaret feel. She actually was rather grateful for the offer of company, because she really didn't want to feel like a loser sitting in the stands all by herself. She was just a little nervous that someone might pick on her or bully her or even that something might go down between she and Regina, and she really didn't want the closest person to her to see her being the weak loser that everyone liked to pick on.

Plastering on a smile, Emma shook her head. "No, no, I would actually really love it if you came with me," she told her foster mom. "I wasn't really looking forward to going alone."

"Oh, alright," Mary Margaret replied, her expression blooming into a smile once more. "Wonderful. Just let me change my shirt, and then we'll be off."

"Okay, cool," Emma said, nodding. She hung out by the door, her nerves growing by the minute, and waited for Mary Margaret to return. When she did, Emma swallowed down her nerves, smiled at her foster mom when the brunette patted her lovingly on the back, and then followed her out the door.

Regina rolled her eyes as ten seconds after the team made their way onto the field, Kathryn shouted out the start of her typical, "David Nolan, he's our man. If he can't do it, no one can," chant. Regina loved David like a brother, but Kathryn's excessive need to constantly point out that the star of the team was her twin was incredibly annoying. Still, she joined in with the chant, and couldn't help but to smile when David turned, waved, and winked at the cheer squad. He was such a ham.

When the guys all turned and huddled around the coach, the cheer squad turned to face the fan stands. Regina smiled at her father who was seated very near the squad, and he returned the loving expression. She then opened her mouth to shout out the start of their next chant, their typical warm-up routine, but the sound choked and died in her throat as her gaze zeroed in on two of the only people on their feet in the stands.

Emma Swan and a woman that Regina recognized but couldn't quite place the name of were making their way up the stairs of the row just to Regina's left, looking for an empty place to sit. Regina's throat grew tight and itching and her heart fluttered madly as she watched the blonde, hair down and flowing in the slight breeze, climb the steps.

She actually came.

Regina's expression turned hard and determined as she cleared her throat to try the chant again. Emma had actually shown up, and while Regina was still peeved over the Ruby thing, she had already realized how quickly she had jumped the gun with Emma in the bathroom earlier that day. She hoped she would get a chance to talk to Emma before the night was up, but if not, she could at least seize this golden opportunity to see if Emma was as interested in her as she was in Emma.

"When I say BLUE, you say WHITE!" Regina shouted out, and she smiled as her voice seemed to capture and ensnare Emma instantly. The blonde's eyes snapped down to the cheerleaders and right to her. As soon as the first line was out in the air, the other cheerleaders fell into formation and picked up the stomp-stomp-clap rhythm of the movements.

"BLUE!" They shouted, and the crowd immediately responded with a roaring, "WHITE!"

Regina arched a brow at Emma as the blonde simply sat staring at her, not participating in the chant. The cheerleader grinned, still, as she shouted out the next line. "When I say STORYBROOKE, you say KNIGHTS!"

Emma did her best not to return Regina's smile or cave and cheer along despite the fact that that arched brow made her stomach flip. Still, she couldn't help but to smirk triumphantly at Regina as the cheerleaders chanted, "STORYBROOKE!" and yet she merely crossed her arms and kept her lips pressed firmly together as the crowd shouted back, "KNIGHTS!"

Mary Margaret, though, seemed more than happy to join in the chants. She shouted every word on Regina's command as the cheerleaders repeated the chant over and over. When they finally switched to a new chant, the pixie-haired woman turned to Emma and asked, "What is going on with you and Regina Mills?"

Emma just about fell off the bench as she twisted, eyes blown wide, to look at her foster mom. "Whoa," she spluttered out. "What? What do you mean?"

Mary Margaret pinned her with a knowing stare. "I mean exactly what I said, Em."

"Nothing...um..." Emma cleared her throat and cast her gaze down to the bleachers. "Nothing is going on."

"Emma Swan," Mary Margaret laughed out. "Don't you lie to me. Are you two dating?"

"NO!" Emma practically shouted, and unfortunately it was right at the moment that the crowd had quieted due to a time-out called in the game. Emma glanced quickly around as several people turned to look at her, and she caught Regina's confused expression as the brunette stared up at her, curious.

Emma cleared her throat again and lowered her voice to an almost whisper as she leaned in toward her foster mom's ear. "No," she repeated. "We're not dating. Why would you even ask that?"

"Because you are both practically eating each other with your eyes," Mary Margaret told her pointedly before laughing out loud at Emma's appalled expression. The blonde's expression then morphed into a smile as Emma chuckled loudly, unable to help herself.

Mary Margaret nudged her. "You like her?"

Emma nodded, turning to look back at Regina, who kept shooting glances up in her direction. "Yeah," she whispered. "I do."

"Does she like you?" Mary Margaret asked, grinning.

"I don't know," Emma told her. "I think so...maybe."

"I didn't even know she was gay," Mary Margaret said. "I wonder if her mother knows. I doubt it, because that woman is scary and strict."

Emma frowned. "I don't know," she replied, still watching Regina, unable to keep her gaze from straying down to the cheerleader's skirt every few minutes. "I don't even know if SHE knows she's gay, or likes girls or whatever."

Mary Margaret glanced down toward the cheerleading captain then and caught Regina staring at Emma. She smiled as she watched the two girls make eyes at each other. "I think she knows, Em," she giggled. "I definitely think she knows."

Regina's heart was already pounding when the half-time buzzer sounded loudly, and the cheerleaders all began to run out onto the field for their half-time dance routine. She didn't know why she was so damn nervous. She had done this routine dozens of times in rehearsal and she had been cheering and dancing in front of audiences for years now. At the same time, she knew *exactly* why she was nervous, even if she didn't want to admit it.

Emma Swan had never been a part of the audience before.

The cheerleaders quickly fell into formation, and Regina got one last glance at Emma before dropping her chin to her chest and waiting for their dance music to blare into the night.

Emma sat up a little straighter as some old techno song began to pump through the open air before morphing into a Lady Gaga song. She watched as Regina moved effortlessly in time with the music, sometimes choppy and cheer-style and sometimes smooth, almost like dirty-dancing. She was positively mesmerized.

On top of that, Regina held her gaze the *entire* time. They were lost in one another's eyes as the brunette moved about the field, high ponytail and short skirt swishing with each movement.

When the routine was over, Emma felt breathless despite having not moved a muscle, and her cheeks flamed a bright red when Mary Margaret's fingers suddenly slipped under her chin and pushed her jaw up to close her gaping mouth.

Mary Margaret giggled as she did so, and when Emma looked over at her sheepishly, the brunette only smiled and patted her leg. "Oh honey," she laughed out, "you've got it so bad."

Emma groaned and dropped her head onto Mary Margaret's shoulder. The woman was totally right.

Regina watched as Emma dropped her head onto her companion's shoulder. The woman was obviously important to her. Jealously instantly reared its ugly head, roaring like a dragon breathing fire in her veins, but Regina instantly scolded herself internally. Her jealousy had led them to the fight they had had earlier that day, and she wouldn't let it ruin this evening. She had to learn to stop jumping to conclusions where Emma Swan was concerned.

"So, who is it?"

Regina blinked rapidly as she turned to find Kathryn staring at her, the blonde's hands on her hips and her eyebrow arched. "What?" Regina asked her, confused.

"Who is it?" Kathryn repeated, smirking.

"Who is who?" Regina asked her.

Kathryn scoffed. "Oh, come on," she drawled. "You've been having cheer sex with someone all night, and I want to know who it is."

Regina gaped as the blonde then turned to scan the crowd. "No, no I haven't," Regina told her, doing her best to sound entirely innocent.

"Yes, you have," Kathryn laughed out as she continued to scan the crowd. "Oh, wait, is it Killian?" She nodded her head in his direction. "I didn't think you liked him."

"Ugh," Regina scoffed. "I don't. He is foul."

Kathryn nodded, grinning. She looked back into the stands before asking, "Is it Michael?"

Regina rolled her eyes. "It isn't anyone, Kathryn. I wasn't having cheer-sex with anyone. I was *cheering*, something you should be doing instead of questioning me over ridiculous things."

"It's half-time for another three minutes," Kathryn told her, "so nice try, but seriously, spill."

"NO ONE!" Regina finally shouted, before lowering her voice quickly, her cheeks flaming as others all turned to look at her. She cleared her throat and straightened her spine. "No one, Kathryn," she repeated in a quiet hiss. "Now mind your business before you push me too far and I move you to the bottom of the pyramid."

Kathryn just laughed and shrugged off the threat, knowing her best friend would never do that to her. "Yeah, okay, Regina," the blonde laughed out. "I'll find out eventually though."

When the game was over, Emma dragged her feet as she followed Mary Margaret down the steps of the bleachers, hoping to catch Regina before they left. Even if she was still a bit pissed at the brunette, she also couldn't help but want to talk to her. Maybe they had both just lost their tempers and a little clarification could fix everything.

But then, Regina had still lied to her, and while Emma couldn't fathom why, she was hoping there was a reasonable explanation.

"Emma, if you want to wait and talk to her, I'm fine with that," Mary Margaret told her foster daughter as they made their way down the steps to the final platform.

Emma nodded a little shyly, not wanting to admit as much out loud. Mary Margaret grinned at her. "Alright, sweetheart. Do you want me to wait here with you or in the car?"

"Um...in the car is fine," Emma told her, and Mary Margaret nodded her agreement. She patted Emma's shoulder before taking off for the car and leaving Emma at the edge of the bleachers to wait for Regina.

Emma waited and waited, her head ducked down as she kicked at the grass. She wasn't going to actively seek Regina out. She would just stand there in plain view and if Regina wanted to talk to her, she could, and if she didn't, then Emma would take it as meaning that whatever friendship they had been forming would be over.

Her heart jumped with hope as she felt someone tap her shoulder, but when she looked up, Emma was surprised to see that it wasn't Regina at all. It was...

"Neal Cassidy?" she asked, her face scrunching in confusion. Why in the hell was one of the most popular jocks in school tapping her on the shoulder?

The footballer swiped at a bit of sweat on his dirt-streaked forehead as he stood before her in his uniform. He grinned and chuckled at her reaction.

"Hey," he said, but Emma just continued to stare at him.

"Uh...you in there?" Neal asked, laughing again, before reaching up to snap his fingers in front of her face.

Emma shook her head quickly and said, "Sorry. What? Why are you talking to me?"

"Wow, you just get right to the point, don't you?" he asked her, still grinning.

"And you are evading it," she pointed out. "Guys like you don't talk to girls like me. So, what do you want? Tutoring?"

"Nah," he told her, stepping in a little closer so that Emma could smell the stench of his sweat. She wrinkled her nose as he said, "I was actually wanting to know if you maybe wanted to see a movie or something sometime."

Emma's brows practically disappeared into her hairline as she gaped at Neal. Then it sank in. He was pranking her. He had to be. Anger boiled in the pit of her stomach as her expression hardened, and she practically spat out her next words. "Whatever this little prank is, you can go play it on someone else. I'm not interested in being your punchline."

Neal seemed genuinely shocked at her words, and he quickly put a hand on her shoulder. She smacked it away, and he put his hands up in surrender. "Sorry," he told her. "I'm not pranking you. I really did want to know if you wanted to go out with me sometime. I swear it's not a prank."

Emma narrowed her eyes at him. "Why would you want to go out with me? Wouldn't it damage your reputation or something?"

He smirked at her. "Nah," he told her with a wink. "I could make you popular."

Ugh, Emma thought. *Seriously?*

"Yeah, no thanks," she told him after a moment.

"Ah, come on," he replied, trying to charm her with a smile shrouded in dirt and peach-fuzz. "It would be fun, and you know a little popularity might do you some good."

"Wow," she told him, rolling her eyes. "Your tactics are *so* charming."

He apparently didn't pick up on the sarcasm, because his smile only grew as he got even nearer her. She put a hand on the padded chest of his uniform and pushed him back. "Thank you," she told him, "but again, *no* thank you. I don't want to go out with you."

His jaw went rigid, and he lowered his voice to a hiss. "What, are you a dyke or something?"

"Is there a problem here?"

Neal whirled around to find Regina hovering behind him, hands on her hips and brow arched toward the sky. He shrugged his shoulders. "Nah," he told her. "This chick was just begging me to go out with her even though I told her I wasn't interested."

Emma gasped at his words. Her face turned bright red as fury boiled and screamed in her gut. Her hands clenched into fists, but before she could say anything, Regina beat her to it.

"Right," Regina drawled, rolling her eyes at Neal. She then cleared her throat and said, "Go away."

"What's your pr--" Neal began, but Regina glared at him and cut him off by barking out the same command. "*GO* away."

He let out a sigh that bordered on a growl as he shoved by the cheerleader and stalked off toward the field. Once he was gone, Regina looked Emma over. She took in the makeup, the flowing hair, the soft blue tank top bordered in lace, and the skin-tight jeans. Her stomach clenched tightly. God, Emma looked *good*. Regina swallowed thickly as her eyes roamed before snapping back up to lock onto Emma's. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Emma didn't answer. She merely stood in place, practically on the verge of exploding.

"I should have known he would do something stupid like that," Regina said after a moment, shifting from foot to foot.

That got Emma's attention. "What do you mean?"

Regina's cheeks reddened as she quietly admitted, "*Neal* asked *David* to ask *me* to invite you to the game so that he could ask you out."

Emma couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Are you fucking kidding me?" she spat out after a minute. "*That's* why you invited me to the game? It wasn't for you at all?"

Regina glanced around nervously, hoping Emma's growing volume wouldn't attract a crowd. "No," she told the blonde. "Originally, that was the plan, but when I asked you to the game, I asked you for *me.* You had already told me you were gay at that point, so I knew it was pointless for Neal anyway. I..." She lowered her voice and took a step closer to the blonde. "Emma, I wanted you to come for *me.* Please believe me."

Seething with anger and humiliation, Emma laughed coldly. "Why should I?" she bit out. "You're a liar, Regina. That's all you've done since the beginning."

Without another word, Emma turned on her heel to march off, but Regina followed after her. She grabbed Emma's arm and yanked the blonde back around to face her. "What the hell are you talking about?" she snapped at the nerd.

Emma smacked Regina's hand away before moving into the brunette's personal space. Her sharp breaths puffed hotly against Regina's face as she growled out, "I'm talking about the fact that you are fucking *FOURTH* in our class, Regina!"

Regina's stomach bottomed out as those words blasted into her with harsh reality. Emma had somehow found her out.

"I'm talking about the fact that you lied to me about tutoring," Emma carried on. "I'm talking about the fact that you've been playing me this whole time, and I don't even know why!"

She turned to walk away again, but then whipped back around. Her gaze locked on Regina's, the cheerleader standing there, head ducked and shame filling her eyes. "And the worst thing about this is that I thought you actually liked me," Emma told her. "I thought you were different."

On that note, she turned and finally left the field.

Regina stood there, dread pooling in her gut and rippling out through her veins. She had never felt so sick in her entire life, and she fought the urge to vomit right there. When she finally made herself move and turned to go back to the benches to grab her bag and talk to her father, she came face to face with Kathryn.

Kathryn arched a brow at her. "You've got some serious explaining to do."

Chapter 15

A/N: Surprise! I couldn't get this story out of my head, so I had to get through this climactic moment before I could relax. Thankfully, I had plenty of tumblr requests, so I was able to do another long chapter this time. Finally, I can relax. I hope you all enjoy this surprise early addition!

I wrote this chapter to the soundtrack of "From the Valley to the Stars" by El Perro del Mar. I encourage you all to give it a try while you read. It really enhances the chapter, especially the last part. Take care, XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Fifteen

Kathryn arched a brow at her. "You've got some serious explaining to do."

Regina fought back a wave of nausea as everything seemed to bombard her at once. Her breaths came in shallow hiccups that barely made it to her lungs. Her head swam dizzily as her vision blurred, and the world suddenly seemed to be incapable of staying in focus. Her mouth filled rapidly as she began to salivate with the nausea, and she tried desperately to swallow it down, but it just kept filling. She rocked on her heels as the dizziness increased and her skin began to prickle almost painfully.

She could hear someone, probably Kathryn, repeating what sounded like her name, but she couldn't be sure. The world had suddenly gone muffled as if someone had clamped their hands tightly over Regina's ears. The sounds were distorted. *Everything* was distorted.

Oh god, Regina thought. *Please don't let me pass out. Please don't let me pass out.*

She recognized the sensations well enough. She had passed out before, once from exhaustion and once from getting overheated during cheerleading

practice. In Regina's opinion, it was one of the most unpleasant sensations a person could experience--that feeling of having lost control of one's own body, of slipping slowly from consciousness, of feeling each little part of you shut down one by one. It was terrifying and not without pain.

Suddenly, there were hands around her shoulders and Kathryn's blurry face swam shakily before her eyes.

"Regina, breathe," Kathryn commanded as soothingly as possible. "Breathe, Regina. Slow, deep breaths."

The words were still distorted, but Regina could just make out what her friend was saying. She watched as the blonde acted out her command for Regina to see, taking slow, deep breaths and nodding her head in encouragement for Regina to copy her. Kathryn had been there both times Regina had passed out before, and since then, she had always been able to prevent it from happening by getting Regina to breathe until she was steady again and then providing her with whatever she needed--water, food, sleep.

Kathryn was a flawed person. They all were, but she had her shining moments. It was situations like this one in which Regina was reminded of all the reasons she loved Kathryn. The girl had an ego the size of a small country and had no qualms about being a bully from time to time, but she was loyal to the people she loved, and she cared more than she ever let on.

Still, Regina was positively *terrified* of how Kathryn would react to this whole Emma-thing as well Regina's sexuality. Honestly, Regina was terrified of how anyone and everyone would react if this got out. She didn't know how to stop being afraid. She didn't know how to reassure herself when the ground just felt so unsteady and the world felt as if it could crumble at any moment.

Regina sucked in a hard, sharp, deep breath--the deepest she could manage--and then slowly let it go as she latched onto Kathryn's arms to ground herself. She knew her fingernails had to be digging painfully into Kathryn's skin, but the blonde didn't complain. She just let Regina squeeze her and hold on.

"Good," Kathryn cooed at her as she continued to rub her hands up and down Regina's shoulders. "That's good, Regina. Take another."

Regina did her best to keep her eyes focused on Kathryn's, and as she took another deep breath, the blonde's blue eyes slowly began to come back into focus. Regina nodded, relieved, and took another deep breath.

"Good," Kathryn told her again, smiling softly. She cupped Regina's cheek then as she asked, "You okay?"

Regina sagged a bit and leaned into Kathryn's touch, finally releasing the blonde's arms from her death-like grip. "Yeah," she choked out. "Better."

Kathryn pulled her into a hug, and Regina rested her head against her friend's shoulder. "I'm sorry," Kathryn whispered, and Regina jerked back to look at her.

"For what?"

"Putting you on the spot like that," she explained. "It's obvious you were overwhelmed, and I didn't make it any better."

"Kat, it's--"

"I just want to know what's going on with you," Kathryn told her. "You've been weird and distant the last few months, and more than ever in the last week. Maybe I've been a bit nosy, but you're my best friend, and I feel like either you suddenly don't like me or you're trying to hide something from me."

Tears stung at Regina's eyelids, and she blinked rapidly to prevent them from growing and falling. "I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice slightly choked. "It's not anything you did."

"Then what is it?" Kathryn asked her. "Regina, we've been best friends since we were kids, you, me, and David. Don't you know you can tell me anything?"

"Can I?" Regina huffed out after a moment, pressing a hand to her temple where her head had begun to throb. "Can I *really*, Kathryn?"

"Of course," Kathryn answered immediately. "Why would you even ask that?"

"Because!" Regina snapped, her voice strained with the tears that were beginning to build again. "Because I feel like if I say what I really feel, if I tell you, then everything will be ruined. Everything will blow up in my face. Everyone will hate me."

Kathryn's face scrunched with confusion, and she didn't know why, but there were already tears burning in her own eyes. She could feel the weight of this moment, even if she didn't know what she was about to hear. It felt monumental.

"Does this have something to do with that Swan girl?" Kathryn asked her.

"EMMA!" Regina practically shouted. "Her name is *Emma*, not 'that Swan girl', not 'nerd', not 'geek', not 'loser'. Her name is *Emma*, and yes it has everything to do with her, but at the same time, Kathryn, it has nothing to do with her."

"Regina." It was her father this time. He was standing a few feet behind Kathryn, having walked up without them even noticing his approach. He had apparently gotten tired of waiting, had grabbed her bag for her, and had come looking. "Is everything alright?"

Regina completely ignored her father. Her heart and her head were both pounding, and she felt like she was standing on the precipice of some grand abyss that she desperately wanted, *needed*, to jump into. It was now or never. *Now* or *never*.

"I haven't told you anything, Kathryn," she continued shakily, but with complete resolution, "because I've been terrified of your reaction, of *everyone's* reaction. I've been terrified of seeing disgust written all over your face, or hatred, or disapproval when you found out the truth about me. I've been terrified of what you would say to me or if you would say

anything at all. I've been terrified of losing you, of losing everyone and everything that has ever meant anything to me in my life, including my popularity, as fucked up as that is!"

"What the hell are you talking about?!" Kathryn shouted back at her despite her extreme discomfort in that moment. The blonde shifted anxiously from foot to foot, her hands wringing together in front of her. "Just spit it out already!"

"I'm gay!" Regina yelled, the words immediately followed by a strangled sob that ripped up from her throat and died as her hand shot up and slapped over her mouth. Tears spilled over her hand as she breathed harshly through her fingers and waited for something, *anything* to happen.

Kathryn just stood there, silent, stunned, and gaping. Henry stood just behind her, and while his eyes had widened for only a second upon hearing his daughter's confession, his expression almost immediately relaxed and a small smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

As her tears ripped out forcefully and in abundance, Regina forced herself to get everything out in the open. She had already gone too far to go back now. She dropped her hand from her mouth and locked gazes with her stunned friend. Her voice was shaky and broken as she said her next words.

"And that girl," she rasped, "that girl that you and all the others love to make fun of at every possible opportunity--she is not a nothing. She is beautiful and smart and funny, and I *want* her. Part of me feels like I might love her."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Regina cupped a hand over her face again before swiping angrily at her tears and taking a deep, sharp breath. When her vision cleared from the tears, she looked up again to see that Kathryn's own cheeks were streaked with wetness, but what surprised Regina the most was that her father, standing just behind Kathryn, was smiling; a genuine smile.

Her heart fluttered madly in chest as that smile flooded her with hope, and when she looked over Kathryn's other shoulder and saw David standing

back by the bleachers, smiling at her as well, that hope blossomed into another wave of courage.

Regina shot by Kathryn and over to her father. "Daddy," she choked out, "there's something I need to do."

Henry reached out and stroked a fallen strand of chocolate hair behind his daughter's ear. "What is it, darling?"

"I have to go see someone," she told him, and before Henry could answer, David stepped forward.

He wrapped his arm tightly around Regina's shoulders, dropped a kiss on top of her head, and said, "Come on, kid. I'll drive you." He knew exactly who she needed to see.

Regina smiled up at him, breathless, and turned to follow him to his truck. Henry reached out for Regina, though, before she could leave and pulled her into a hug. "I'm proud of you," he whispered into her ear as he bent down to hold her close.

Tears slipped over Regina's eyelids and down her cheeks as she nodded against his shoulder and squeezed him as tightly as she could. When they released one another a moment later, Regina hesitated, but Henry encouraged her to go on with David.

"We will talk soon," he promised her, and Regina nodded confidently before turning to catch up with David who had walked off a bit to give them space.

As they left the field, David shot a glance in his twin's direction. "Get a ride with Mr. Mills, Kat," he told her, knowing the man would be more than happy to give his sister a ride.

That seemed to shake Kathryn out of her stupor, and she took a step forward as David and Regina walked away from her. "Regina, wait!" she shouted.

Regina glanced over her shoulder, halting only a moment. She looked into Kathryn's eyes, seeing a mixture of emotion swirling there. "Later," she promised Kathryn. "Right now, I'm tired of waiting."

A moment later, she and David were practically sprinting to his waiting truck.

"Turn here?" David asked, and Regina nodded. As he turned onto the road, he reached over and patted Regina's knee. "This is kind of exciting, isn't it?"

Regina laughed nervously. "This is kind of terrifying," she told him, and he just squeezed her knee in reassurance.

"It's gonna be fine," he told her.

When they pulled up outside Emma's house, Regina's heart felt like it was desperately attempting to hammer its way out of her body. She and David climbed out of the truck and made their way up to the door. David reached up to knock, but Regina's arm shot out at the last second and grabbed his wrist to stop him.

"Oh god, David," she hissed quietly. "I don't know if I can do this."

He smiled at her and squeezed her hand. "Sure you can."

"What if she doesn't feel the same way?"

"Then she would be crazy," David told her. "It will be fine, Regina. Just breathe."

Regina sucked in a hard breath. "Right," she said, nodding firmly despite feeling anything but confident. "It will be fine. Right. You're right."

David just chuckled and reached up to knock on the door again. Less than a minute passed before the door was pulled open to reveal a petite, pixie-haired young woman.

David smiled his most charming smile at her, knowing he would have to be the one to get them in the door. "Hello ma'am," he greeted.

Mary Margaret offered him a kind smile as she returned his greeting. Her gaze, though, kept darting over to Regina. She had a feeling she knew exactly what was going on here despite the fact that Emma hadn't said a word since the game. "Hello," she replied. "Can I help you?"

"Yes ma'am," David answered. "My name is David, and this is Regina, and we go to school with Emma. Is she here? Are you her sister?"

Mary Margaret chuckled as he winked at her with that last sentence. Teenagers, she thought. Then again, he was quite the charmer. "I'm her foster mother," she told him, and both David and Regina were surprised given how young the woman was. "My name is Mary Margaret, and yes, Emma is here."

"That's great. Can--" David began, but Mary Margaret quickly cut him off.

She glanced over to Regina again, whose head was ducked. "But," the pixie-haired woman interjected, "I don't think she wants to see you, Regina."

Regina whimpered quietly before letting out a long sigh. "I know," she replied, "but I really need to talk to her."

"She really does," David said, nodding.

"I swear I am not here to hurt her feelings," Regina told Mary Margaret.

"She's really not," David chimed in, nodding again.

"And I think, I *hope*, she might really like to hear what I have to say," Regina finished.

"She really might," David tacked on, and Mary Margaret giggled.

Before Mary Margaret could respond, though, Emma's voice rang out from behind her. "Let her in," the blonde said, her voice raspy. The sound ate at

Regina's gut as it gave away that Emma had been crying.

Regina didn't need any other encouragement, though. She ducked under Mary Margaret's arm and shot into the house. Emma didn't even bother greeting her before turning and going back up the stairs, a silent command hanging in the air for the cheerleader to follow. Regina took off after her and up the creaking stairs.

David and Mary Margaret watched them go before turning and shrugging at one another. Mary Margaret smiled at him. "Would you like to come in? I have cookies."

"Ooh cookies," David said, grinning, before following Mary Margaret to the kitchen.

Regina followed Emma into her bedroom, shutting the door behind her. She watched as Emma plopped down onto her bed, sighing and closing her eyes. Regina just stood by the door, shifting nervously and waiting for something to happen. Should she just start explaining herself or should she wait for Emma to say something? Thankfully, Emma spoke up a moment later.

"Why should I listen to anything you have to say?" the nerdy blonde asked bitterly without opening her eyes.

Regina's heart ached at the raw pain in Emma's voice. Her eyes scanned over the blonde, noticing that Emma's makeup was gone, her hair was yanked back in a messy bun, her big thick black-rimmed glasses sat perched on her nose, and she had changed into blue pajama pants and a baggy white t-shirt. Regina still thought she looked beautiful, maybe more beautiful than ever.

When she finally found her voice again, Regina quietly said, "You didn't let me explain before you left."

"Can you blame me?" Emma countered, opening her eyes to glare in Regina's direction. Her jaw shifted as she gritted and ground her teeth,

anger still coursing through her system. She was mad at herself more than anyone, mad that she had fallen into a trap like this. She pushed herself up off her bed to face Regina fully. Her body felt tight and constricted as she clenched her fists and glared at the cheerleader.

"My whole life," she bit out, "I've been pushed around and taken advantage of and made fun of by people like you. My *whole* life, I've been the target of the popular kids' pranks and jokes, just because I'm smart or maybe because I wear these glasses or because I wear second-hand clothes or maybe because I'm an orphan. It doesn't matter the reason, because the point is that my whole life, I've been picked on by people like you, and the *one* time that I decide to trust one of you, to let one of you in; the *one* time I decide to believe that one of you could be different, I find out that the entire foundation of our friendship was a lie. You lied to me, Regina, from the very beginning. You never needed tutoring at all, and you lied to me about the game too, and now I don't even know if anything you ever said to me was true."

Regina's bottom lip and chin trembled as she forced herself to hold Emma's gaze, but the tears building in the blonde's emerald eyes were tearing at her soul. "I--" she started, but Emma just sighed and shook her head.

"I don't know if any of it was real at all," Emma told her. "I thought maybe...I thought we..." She huffed out an annoyed breath as a salted droplet finally broke free and slipped down her cheek. "And now, I look at you, and all I can think is that you're a liar. You're a liar, and you're just like the rest of them."

The words felt like jagged knives tearing into Regina's flesh and heart over and over. She hated that she had made Emma feel this way, that she had let her insecurities cloud her judgment. She hated that she hadn't just been honest with Emma from the beginning.

"I was scared," Regina blurted, breathing heavily as her own tears tracked her cheeks. "I was scared, okay?"

"Of what?" Emma snapped. "Of me?"

"Of everything!" Regina shouted, unable to help herself. She took a step forward, her heart pounding so hard that she wondered, briefly, if she might be on the verge of passing out again. "I was scared of you, and of me, and of the things that were going on inside my head," she told the blonde. "You're so *sure*, Emma. You've got yourself all figured out, but I don't. I didn't. I was scared. I *am* scared."

Emma said nothing, but those emerald eyes had widened slightly and were locked sharply on Regina as the cheerleader took yet another step forward, and then another.

Regina kept inching forward until she was right in Emma's space, their chests heaving as they breathed too quickly, as their hearts beat too rapidly and too harshly for either of them to relax.

"Yes," Regina whispered as she grew so close to Emma that she could feel the blonde's breath on her, "I lied to you. I'm not denying that."

Emma reached up and swiped roughly at her cheeks under her glasses. "Why?" she asked raggedly.

"Because I didn't know what else to do," Regina told her quietly, brokenly, trying to smile despite the trembling in her lips and chin, "and I had to be near you."

Emma gasped softly, and Regina took that opportunity to extend a shaky hand and cup it around the blonde's cheek. "I had to be next to you," she whispered. "I had to be close to you."

Emma stared into Regina's eyes, seeing nothing but sincerity. She shook in place as she reached up and wrapped her hand around Regina's where it rested around her cheek. "Me?" she whispered.

Regina nodded. "You," she answered. "I was so drawn to you that it was driving me crazy." *Might as well throw it all out there, Regina. It's apparently a night for confessions.* "I still am. I saw an opportunity when you asked me about tutoring, and I took it. It was a lie, yes, but it wasn't a trick. It wasn't a prank."

Emma closed her eyes briefly for a moment, letting those words sink in.

"And ever since that first conversation we had," Regina continued, feeling more and more confident by the moment, by the fact that Emma wasn't pushing her away, "I can't stop thinking about you. I can't stop hoping that maybe you are thinking about me too."

Those words blasted through Emma's heart like a wildfire that she was more than willing to let burn her alive. She let out a strangled sigh as her eyes slowly fluttered open again, and the breath sucked right out of her lungs as she locked onto Regina's deep, hopeful eyes hovering right in front of her.

"Regina," she whispered, and Regina's eyes only grew wider, more hopeful.

Still, the brunette nervously asked, "You want me to go?" She swiped away a tear making its way down Emma's cheek and waited for the blonde's response.

When Emma shook her head slowly back and forth against Regina's palm, the brunette's heart soared. Her stomach flipped and trembled. Her throat felt like it was either going to burn to a crisp or tighten until she couldn't breathe as she swallowed thickly and continued to wait.

Emma felt so many things in that moment--relieved, guilty for having been so cruel in her anger, hopeful, thrilled, anxious. She felt like she could just explode with all the sensations running through her body, but the one that stood out most was the one she knew she needed to act on. Regina had been so brave, showing up at her house and confessing all these feelings when she had *everything* to lose. The least Emma could do was be just as brave.

So, before she could let her nerves get the better of her, Emma reached out with her free hand and slipped her fingers into the chocolate hair pulled tight at the back of Regina's neck where her ponytail began. She gently pulled the cheerleader's head a little closer to hers so that their noses were practically bumping.

"I don't want you to leave," Emma whispered. "I want you to kiss me."

Regina was unable to stop the strange sob of joy that tore through her, but she didn't care. She killed the sound on Emma's lips as she surged through that minute bit of distance between them, and pressed and pressed with her whole heart.

Chapter 16

A/N: Hello everyone. My life has been a hectic mess lately, my health has not been the best, and I recently lost a loved one. So, I do apologize for making you all wait much longer than was intended, but it could not be helped, and thank you all for being patient, We are nearing the end of this story, and I just want to thank everyone for their enthusiasm for and love of this little fic that grew into so much more than I ever intended it to be. Thank you for the support. I greatly appreciate it. Enjoy! XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Sixteen

Regina was unable to stop the strange sob of joy that tore through her, but she didn't care. She killed the sound on Emma's lips as she surged through that minute bit of distance between them, and pressed and pressed with her whole heart.

The kiss was shorter than expected, chaste but still passionate. It was Emma who ended it, disconnecting from Regina's plump lips and nuzzling her nose against the cheerleader's. "Regina," she whispered, "you're trembling."

Regina let out a quiet, strangled laugh. Her hands rested on Emma's shoulders, her fingers gripping harder than she realized, and she was, in fact, trembling. Her entire body seemed to vibrate as she breathed, shallow and rapid, against Emma's lips. The events leading up to this moment had packed her so full of adrenaline that it was like she might explode with it at any moment. "I know," she answered, her voice unsteady.

Emma pulled back just a bit so that she could look into the cheerleader's eyes. They were cloudy with unshed tears, which surprised her. "Why?" she asked. "Are you okay?"

"Mm," Regina hummed, nodding gently. "I suppose I'm merely overwhelmed."

Emma ran her hands down Regina's back, feeling the girl quiver beneath her touch. "Why? Because we kissed?"

"Yes," Regina whispered, "and because I...everything completely changed tonight."

Her breathing became even shallower as the clouds in her eyes began to rain down her cheeks, and soft hiccup sounds escaped with each word she tried to force out. "My entire life," she barely managed to choke out, and then suddenly she was sobbing.

"Hey, hey," Emma cooed softly, suddenly nervous that she had maybe done something wrong, or pushed Regina too quickly. Maybe she shouldn't have asked for that kiss, but then Regina hadn't seemed hesitant to respond. Still, Emma worried that she had somehow done something to upset the cheerleader.

Emma slid her hands up Regina's arms and pried the brunette's fingers from her shoulders. "Come over here," she said and led Regina to her bed. She pulled the cheerleader gently down and then sat beside her, facing her.

Regina blew out a hard breath and shook her head as Emma reached up to wipe away her tears. "That's good," Emma told her. "Just breathe, and try to calm down."

"I'm sorry," Regina said raggedly, letting out another hard sigh of breath. "You must think I'm crazy."

Emma chuckled softly. "I don't think you're crazy," she replied. "Like you said, you're just overwhelmed, but I wish you would tell me why. Did something happen?"

Regina took several deep breaths before she sniffled and nodded her head.

"You want to tell me what that something was?" Emma asked her. "I mean besides your obviously past-due revelation that I am cute and kissable."

Regina laughed at that, which warmed Emma's heart because the blonde was fully aware that Regina needed that laugh in that moment. The cheerleader wiped at her own cheeks, and her voice continued to tremble as she responded. "The kiss itself may have been past due, but the revelation wasn't." She smiled almost shyly at Emma, that simple expression sucking the air right out of Emma's lungs.

Regina looked positively stunning in that moment, all timid and splotchy from crying. Her eyes were red-rimmed and glassy and so incredibly honest. It only made Emma want to kiss her again.

So she did.

Their second kiss was just as chaste, but gentler than the first, and it somehow seemed to simultaneously steal Regina's breath and help her to breathe easier.

"What was that for?" Regina asked when they separated, her smile now less timid and much wider than before.

Emma blushed softly. "You just look so beautiful right now."

Regina rolled her eyes. "I'm all splotchy."

"Yeah, you are," Emma laughed out, to which Regina smacked her arm playfully, "but you're the most beautiful splotchy girl I've ever seen."

Regina sucked in a shaky breath and then let it out in an even shakier sigh. "Emma Swan," she breathed in a voice that barely carried any sound, "you have turned my entire world upside down."

Emma chewed on her bottom lip as her chest grew tight and her throat suddenly felt constricted. "I'm sorry?" she whispered, and it was definitely a question.

"Don't be," the cheerleader told her. "It was exactly what I needed." She let the silence hang for a moment before quietly confessing, "After you left, I told Kathryn that I am gay."

Emma gasped softly. "Oh my god," she said, nearly choking with her surprise. She knew how major that was, how much potential it had to basically ruin the remaining months of their high school careers for Regina.

"Well, actually," Regina amended, "I sort of *shouted* it at her, and in effect, confessed to my father as well."

Emma's eyes widened further, and she reached over to slip her hand over Regina's. Their fingers tangled together in the small space between their bodies, and they sat there in silence a moment while Emma stared and Regina merely nodded her head.

"Well, how'd it go?" Emma finally blurted when she couldn't stand it any longer. "What did Kathryn say? What did your dad say?"

"My father actually told me he was proud of me," Regina told her, smiling.

"Regina, that's great!" Emma said, squeezing the cheerleader's hand. "Not everyone has that with their parents. That's seriously awesome."

Regina didn't say anything, simply bowing her head and nodding. She thought of her mother in that moment, and she knew that Cora's reaction would be nothing like her father's. It was a storm she was not looking forward to weathering, but somehow, sitting on Emma's bed, holding Emma's hand, and knowing that she had just kissed and *could* kiss that beautiful girl now whenever she pleased made any upcoming struggle seem not so scary and so incredibly worth it.

"And Kathryn?" Emma asked, shaking Regina from her thoughts.

"She didn't say anything," Regina told her, shrugging. "Not a word. She just stared at me."

"Damn," Emma muttered, reaching up to push her thick-rimmed glasses up on her nose.

Regina's heart melted at the action, one she had damn-near drooled over on several occasions. She shook her head, chuckling, and leaned over to kiss

the blonde again. "I love when you do that," she admitted after pressing her lips to Emma's.

"Do what?" Emma asked her, confused.

Regina grinned. "Push your glasses up like that." She kissed her again. "You're such a nerd."

Emma laughed out loud at that. She pushed Regina's shoulder teasingly and said, "Nerds are hot."

Regina smiled brightly. "No argument here," she replied, her smile morphing into a wicked smirk that made Emma's body flood with a rolling wave of heat. And before she realized what she was doing, her mouth was on Regina's again.

The kiss was far from chaste this time. It was hard and eager, sloppy but neither girl cared. They ran their hands over one another's faces and necks, shoulders and arms, and then their fingers linked roughly as they held onto one another tightly and kissed like they might never see each other again.

When they finally pulled apart, a little bit breathless and both grinning like giddy children, they burst into shared laughter.

"Why are we laughing?" Emma choked out through said laughter.

Regina's shoulders shook with her own. "Because all of this is just...I don't know, crazy? It's crazy."

Emma's laughter faded into a soundless smile. "Yeah," she agreed, nodding, "but it's kind of perfect, too."

Regina rubbed her thumb over Emma's knuckles and nodded. "It is."

They stared into one another's eyes for a long, silent moment before Emma quietly asked, "Do you think she'll be okay with it? Kathryn, I mean, you know, after the shock wears off or whatever?"

Regina's expression showed her conflict and her worry in that moment, but then she merely shook her head and shrugged. "I don't know," she answered honestly. "I hope she will be. I hope she can be supportive, because this is the first time in my life that I feel like I've truly done the right thing--being honest with myself and with the people that I care about. It's like a weight has suddenly been lifted off my shoulders, and I can actually breathe."

Emma nodded, understanding. "It was like that for me, too."

They squeezed each other's hands simultaneously and smiled at one another. After another long moment of simply being together, Regina sighed and stood up. "I should go now," she told Emma, both of their expressions falling with their mutual disappointment. "I need to go home and talk to my parents."

"Okay." Emma stood and followed Regina to her bedroom door. "Regina?" she whispered just before the cheerleader crossed the threshold.

Regina turned back at the soft echo of her name.

"What happens if she doesn't accept it?" Emma asked once their gazes were locked again. "What happens if everyone at school finds out? What happens when this bubble we're in bursts and everything gets serious? Will you regret it? Coming out, I mean, and well...all of this...with me."

Regina's heart ached at the obvious fear in Emma's eyes and voice. She knew the blonde was afraid of what would happen when they returned to school, of how people would react, or whether everything would fall apart or not, and truthfully, Regina was just as afraid. But Regina was coming to know, to understand, that facing your fears, no matter the consequences, was so much better than running from them. She didn't want to spend her life running.

She stepped into Emma's space again, reaching out to lace her fingers through Emma's once more. "Emma," she whispered, waiting for those deep green eyes to look up at her. When they did, Regina smiled softly. "I could never regret you."

When Regina stepped into her house that night after David dropped her off, she was surprised to find both her father and mother sitting like statues on the couch, waiting for her. She moved hesitantly, unsure of what exactly was going on, but her father's gentle smile made her at least a little more at ease.

"Hi," she said softly, standing just to the side of the couch.

"Regina," Cora said stiffly, arching a brow, "take a seat." She motioned to the smaller couch that sat just to the right of the one both her parents were seated on, and once she was settled, her mother began again. "Now, your father says that you have something you would like to tell me."

Regina swallowed thickly, her heart now pounding inside her chest. She glanced to her father, who only continued to smile. He nodded at her encouragingly, and Regina took a deep breath before facing her mother once more. "Yes," she answered, her voice shaking even harder now than it had been in Emma's bedroom.

Cora sighed. "Well, out with it then, dear."

"I..." Regina choked on the single word, but then steeled herself. She could do this. It was just one more confession in a night full of confessions. She could do this. "I like girls."

Cora's brows shot up toward her hairline. "Pardon?" she practically stuttered out.

"Girls," Regina repeated, her hands twisting tightly together in her lap. "I like girls."

"No, I heard you, silly girl," Cora snapped. "I simply assumed you misspoke. Surely, you aren't suggesting that you're a...a..."

"A lesbian," Regina finished for her before biting her tongue to keep from lashing out at the disgusted look on her mother's face. She took a breath to keep her cool and said, "I didn't misspeak. I meant what I said."

"Regina," Cora said sternly, "you are just confused. It is a stressful time, and you--"

"I'm not confused," Regina snapped, cutting her off. "I've felt this way for a long time, Mother. I just finally found the courage to say it aloud."

"No," Cora replied bitterly. "No, no daughter of mine is going to be a lesbian."

"Cora," Henry interjected softly.

"No, Henry!" Cora snapped. She turned back to her daughter. "Regina, you will stop with this nonsense."

Heat rippled through Regina's veins at that. "It's not nonsense, Mother!" she practically growled through gritted teeth. "You voted in favor of equality, so how can you possibly say this to me?"

"Well," Cora scoffed, "what one finds acceptable for others does not always equate to what one finds acceptable for her own child."

"So, it's okay for other people in the world to be gay, but not me because I'm *your* daughter?" Regina cried. "Do you have any idea how disgusting that is?"

"What's disgusting is your attitude and this behavior," Cora barked at her. "How dare you snap at me!"

"No, Mother, how dare *you*!" Regina returned, jumping to her feet. "How dare you put your own discomfort over *my* happiness! I'm your daughter. You are supposed to accept me no matter what I am or what I choose."

Cora stood as well, her face red with her anger. "I am *supposed* to guide you to make the *proper* choices, not stand by while you make the wrong ones!"

Tears leaked from Regina's eyes as she turned to her father. "Are you going to say anything?" she shouted at him. "Or are you just going to let her walk all over me and all over you, *again*?"

Henry's expression hardened. He took a deep breath and pushed himself to his feet. "Cora," he said sternly.

"Oh, sit down, you great fool!" Cora snapped at him. "Don't encourage this behavior of hers."

"No," Henry said sharply. "No, Cora. I've kept quiet too many times in our marriage, and I'm not going to do it again. I'm not going to keep quiet while you berate our daughter for something she cannot help or change."

Cora was positively shocked by her husband's outburst, as was Regina. Regina's heart thudded as she sucked in a breath and smiled at her father through her tears.

"You *support* this?" Cora asked him, outraged.

"I do," Henry told her firmly. "I support anything that makes Regina happy, and as her mother, you should as well."

Cora shook with her anger, but instead of lashing out at her husband, she turned sharply on her heel and marched away toward the stairs. She took them up loudly and then slammed her door once she reached the top.

Once silence settled over the living room again, Regina turned to her father and quietly said, "Thank you."

"Don't," Henry told her, shaking his head. He stepped over and rested a large hand on his daughter's shoulder. "Don't you thank me for something I should have done a long time ago, something I haven't done nearly enough of in your lifetime." He squeezed her shoulder and sighed. "I promise you, Regina. I will do better. From now on, I will do better."

Regina nodded, tears slipping down her cheeks. She stepped forward and melted into her father's embrace. She squeezed him tightly when he pressed a kiss to her temple. "She will come around, dear," he promised her.

Regina sighed, completely exhausted from the night's events. She nodded against her father's shoulder, hoping against hope that he was right.

Chapter 17

A/N: Hello everyone. Thank you for being patient. I appreciate it so much, as well as all of your wonderful reviews and support.

There will only be one more chapter in this story and then an epilogue. Thank you all for sticking it out with me. I hope you enjoy. XO- Chrmdpoet

Chapter Seventeen

Emma pushed the tiered cart down the third aisle of the Fantasy section to deposit a load of books in their rightful positions. "Ugh, some of these teen novels," she muttered as she pushed one into an empty slot on the shelf.

"Says the only *teen* in the room," came the chuckled reply from one aisle over.

Emma grinned. "Well, clearly my tastes far exceed my age."

Two thick books were yanked from the shelf in front of Emma, creating a window to the next aisle. Emma laughed as her best friend's face popped into view, bright blue eyes showing her amusement. "Clearly," Belle replied. "Now, are you going to tell me the reason you showed up here at six in the morning on a Saturday, half-excited and half-panicked, or are we going to continue avoiding it?"

Emma chuckled. "My avoidance tactics are failing me."

"No, they're working," Belle told her, grinning. "They are just obvious."

Sighing, Emma nodded. "I think I've got a girlfriend."

Belle gasped softly before breaking into a massive smile. "Emma!" she replied excitedly before making her way around the bookshelf and into the blonde's aisle. She smacked Emma's arm, laughing. "That's *great* news! Why are we avoiding it?"

Emma groaned. "Because I'm nervous," she admitted, leaning forward to rest her forehead against Belle's shoulder. "I don't even know if we're official, and I'm afraid of what will happen when everyone at school finds out."

"What do you mean?" the brunette asked, patting Emma's back before grabbing her hand to pull her over to one of the library's large tables. "You've never cared what people thought before."

"I know." Emma shook her head. "But this is different."

"How so?"

"She's popular," Emma confessed. "Like really, *really* popular." She then lowered her voice to a whisper and said, "She's a cheerleader."

Belle laughed. "Why are you whispering?"

"Because," Emma told her, "it's like saying Voldemort. Popularity is the Dark Lord of the high school hierarchy."

Belle could not stop laughing at this point. "Emma," she said once she finally calmed down, "you shouldn't worry so much."

"Seriously?" Emma drawled. "You don't think the fact that I am eighty-seven percent sure that I am now dating the most popular girl in school is something that I should be a little concerned about?"

"Not at all." Belle chuckled at Emma's shocked expression. "Everything will work out."

"Belle, I love you, but this is not one of your epic romance novels," Emma told her. "We don't have a guaranteed happy ending. I mean, Regina and I just got--"

"Regina Mills?" Belle asked, interrupting.

Emma nodded, and Belle grinned. "Well done," the brunette said. "She is gorgeous."

"I know," "Emma replied, "and she is also a god at our school. She is a god, and I am...well, *not.* Do you see the problem now?"

"No."

"Seriously?"

"Emma," Belle began, reaching over to pat her friend's hand. "She *chose* you. No matter what happens, remember that. Nothing that anyone says can take that away from you."

Emma let those words sink in and spread. She felt all of her nerves dissipate in their wake, and her body relaxed. "Wow," she said after a moment. "Thank you."

Belle grinned. "You're welcome. Now, tell me everything. You know I live for a good love story."

"A tale as old as time?" Emma joked. She liked to poke fun at the librarian ever since finding out that Belle's parents had named her after the princess in *Beauty and the Beast.* Her mother had loved the story. "The teenage lesbian version."

"Precisely," Belle laughed out. "What did Mary Margaret say about it?"

"Well, first she squealed," Emma told her, "and then she hugged me. Then I told her that Regina kissed me, and--"

"Oh, this is getting even better!" Belle interjected, beaming, and Emma just smiled and rolled her eyes.

"Anyway, I told her that Regina kissed me, and she squealed again and then she gave me a lecture on the responsibilities of sex."

Belle giggled at that. "This should be a fun story."

"And it all starts with tutoring lessons," Emma told her before launching into the tale of how she and Regina had gone from strangers in the hallway to sharing kisses in Emma's bedroom.

Regina closed her eyes as she leaned her forehead against the steering wheel of her car. She had been sitting in her car in the school parking lot for nearly fifteen minutes, avoiding going in until the point at which she couldn't avoid it anymore. Unfortunately, that point had finally arrived.

She groaned as she turned her car off and reached for her bag in the passenger seat before exiting the warm haven that was her vehicle. It had been a long, rough weekend filled with biting remarks from her mother, complete silence from Kathryn (not a call or a visit), sad smiles from her father, and a damning text from David informing her that according to "his buddies", a few people had overheard her little coming-out screamfest after the game Friday night and the news of her gayness had already spread like wildfire.

Regina was not prepared to deal with the inevitable bullshit of this day, and yet she had to. If she was honest, she was completely terrified of stepping into that school. She was terrified of what people would think, of what they would say or if they would say anything at all. She was afraid of being chewed up and spit out. She was afraid that for the first time in her life she was going to be hanging from the lowest rung of the social ladder rather than perched at the top, peering down.

She was just afraid.

No matter how much she wished it didn't affect her, it did, that fear. It ate at her insides as she took slow steps toward the school. She never turned though. She wasn't going to run and hide. She was going to hold her head high and glare daggers at anyone who tried to break her.

She would not go down without a fight, especially not when the only supposed crime she had committed was finally having the courage to be honest about who she was.

There was *one* thing about this school day that Regina was looking forward to, though, and that was seeing Emma. They hadn't spoken much over the weekend, though Regina wasn't sure why. Maybe it was awkward because they had sort of just attacked one another in Emma's bedroom and then had

been like, 'kay bye!' Maybe they were both still so stunned about everything that they needed the weekend to process. Or maybe Regina had just been preoccupied, dealing with her mother, and Emma had been busy doing whatever it was that Emma Swan did on the weekends. Probably extra homework.

Regina smiled softly as the thought popped into her head. She couldn't help herself. The thought of Emma, glasses pushed up on her nose, hovering over a stack of books and working through algebraic equations or memorizing the Periodic Table of Elements in her spare time made Regina's heart melt, and weirdly enough, it also sort of turned her on.

Regina did her best to cement that image in her mind as she finally reached the doors of the school. She straightened her spine, lifted her chin defiantly, took a deep breath, and stepped inside. Everything carried on as normal for the first few steps, and Regina started to feel herself relax, but when she turned the corner into the hall where she and most of the other seniors had their lockers, everything changed.

The hustle and bustle ground to a halt as the jocks and cheerleaders in the hall all seemed to notice her and stop in their tracks to stare, and for just a second there was absolute silence. The silence then erupted with hissing whispers and quiet laughter, but eyes never left her. She knew they were all talking about her, and she even overheard a few of them.

"No wonder she'd never put out for any of us," one of the jocks joked, elbowing his buddy in the ribs. The two of them laughed and high-fived, and Regina felt her stomach clench and roll uncomfortably.

"I heard she's been hooking up with that Swan chick." The whispers and laughter continued. "Talk about slumming it."

"Who knows how many times she's checked us out in the locker rooms without us knowing it?" one of the cheerleaders whispered to another. "Gross."

Regina's flesh felt sickly hot as her heart raced beneath her ribs. Her palms began to sweat. A soft hum filled her ears like a haze that grew into a

deafening buzz. She could hear her own breaths, harsh and sharp.

Don't let them see you sweat, she told herself. *Never let them see you break.* Regina clenched her teeth and hardened her gaze into ice as she pushed through the hallway and shot straight to her locker.

She couldn't help but notice that Kathryn was entirely absent. Nausea roared in Regina's gut at the thought that Kathryn might feel the same way that some of the other kids did, the ones who obviously didn't care to voice their shitty, judgmental opinions loud enough for the entire school populace to hear.

God help her get through this day.

When the bell rang for lunch period, Regina made her way to her locker as quickly as possible. She threw her books inside before disappearing into the nearest bathroom. There were a few girls inside but they surprisingly paid Regina no mind. She slipped into a stall, locked the door, and sucked in several deep breaths until she was able to calm herself down.

All morning, she had been able to feel nothing but eyes on her. She could hear people whispering about her in classes, or at least she assumed they were whispering about her given the way they never seemed to stop looking at her as they did so. It made her skin crawl.

What was worse was that she had yet to see Emma, and she had only seen Kathryn a few times from across the classroom. The blonde hadn't made eye contact with her or attempted to speak with her. Regina had resigned to thinking that that was Kathryn's way of saying she didn't approve. It made her sick to her stomach.

Regina couldn't recall a time in her life when she had felt more uncomfortable. Even the moments leading up to her coming out had not been as bad as this. She felt so terribly alone.

She hid in the bathroom until she was the only one left and the loud sounds from the hallway died down to silence, signifying that the students had all

finally made their way to the cafeteria. Regina stepped out of her stall and splashed a bit of water on her face at the sink. When she opened the door to step out into the hallway, Regina was surprised to find someone waiting for her.

"Hiding out, kid?" David asked her, smiling softly as he leaned against the lockers on the opposite side of the hall.

Regina's heart swelled and tears pricked at her eyes. She did her best not to let them rise and fall, not to let her lip tremble the way it wanted to. She did her best to keep her composure as she sighed and let her shoulders sag a bit before stepping across the hall and letting David pull her into a warm hug.

"I hate this place," she muttered into his shoulder as he rubbed her back and chuckled.

"Bad day, I take it?" he asked her.

She nodded. "The worst."

"I thought it might be pretty bad," he admitted, pulling out of their hug and propping his arm around the cheerleader's shoulders instead. He steered her toward the cafeteria. "I tried to wait for you at your locker this morning, but you never showed and I had to meet with Mr. Hopper before class."

Regina sighed and squeezed David's side. He had truly turned out to be one of the best friends a girl could have, like a big brother who had her back no matter what. It was a good feeling. "I put it off as long as possible," Regina drawled. "I considered skipping, to be honest."

David laughed softly. "People suck."

"They do," Regina agreed. She bit her lip as she contemplated whether or not she should even broach the subject of David's twin sister, but it seemed she didn't have to. David apparently knew what was on her mind.

"No," he told her without any prompting, "she hasn't said anything to me about it."

"Nothing at all?" Regina asked, unable to believe that Kathryn hadn't at least ranted to her twin of all people. "Not a word all weekend?"

David sighed. "Not a word."

Regina's stomach clenched painfully. "Great," she replied dryly. "That cannot possibly be a good sign."

"It's not necessarily a bad one, though," David tried, but Regina just shook her head.

"This is ridiculous," she told him, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice, "the way everyone is behaving...Kathryn, my mother, the others. You would think I just confessed to being a mass murderer. I just *enjoy* women. It's not the end of the world."

David laughed loudly at that. "Hey, I don't get it either," he told her, squeezing her shoulder. "I enjoy women too."

For the first time that day, Regina actually smiled a genuine smile. She even managed a small laugh as she nudged David's side as a way of thanking him for making her day a little easier and for not treating her any differently. He nudged her back, saying she was more than welcome.

They walked together through the doors of the cafeteria, Regina mentally bracing herself once more, but they only managed a few steps inside before both of them froze in place.

Regina's heart leapt into her throat as the scene seemed to play out in slow-motion before her. She saw Emma ,and for a split second, she warmed at the sight, but then that feeling evolved into dread as both she and David noticed the person following the blonde.

Neal Cassidy, shit-eating grin firmly in place, crept up behind Emma as the blonde made her way toward the same table she always occupied. He waited until she dropped into her seat before raising his arm high over her head.

Regina felt her stomach bottom out, her hand clenching around David's arm, as she watched Neal dangle the milk carton over Emma's head, and a second later, a stream of milk splattered down onto the girl.

Emma's gasp was like a thunderclap followed by the heated lightning strike of Neal's bitter exclaim of "Dyke!"

"Hey!" Regina shouted, unable to stop herself as she shot forward, practically sprinting across the cafeteria, David on her heels. Fury burned in every cell in her body, and she no longer gave a flying fuck what anyone thought. All that mattered in that moment was Emma.

Regina's hands were already clenched into tight fists and her teeth were on the verge of being ground into dust as she practically flew across the room. She saw nothing but red; that is, until a blur of movement shot between her and Neal, whom she was rapidly closing in on. She saw a flash of blonde, heard a sickening crunch, and then all of a sudden, Neal Cassidy was on the cafeteria floor, howling and holding a hand over his nose, which was now leaking crimson.

Regina blinked rapidly, trying to process.

"Holy shit," she heard David choke out from behind her before he began to roar his laughter, and that was when Regina finally snapped back to reality and realized what was actually happening right in front of her.

Kathryn stood like a stone statue over Neal, who was actually crying over his bloody nose. The blonde cheerleader cradled her fist, her knuckles already beginning to bruise, but her eyes were hard and sharp as daggers as she glared down at the jock. "You stay the hell away from Emma Swan," she spat out at him.

Teachers were swarming them from all sides at this point, tending to Neal and Emma, but Kathryn didn't seem to even care or notice. She turned toward the tables occupied by the more popular cliques, especially the jocks and cheerleaders. "That goes for all of you," she said, raising her voice so that everyone could hear. "Emma Swan is off limits. If any of you lay a finger on her, you'll answer to me."

David, brimming with pride for his sister, cleared his throat and loudly added, "*And* me!"

Regina could not believe any of this was happening at all. Her heart hammered in her chest as she tried and failed and tried again to process. She locked gazes with Kathryn, and tears built rapidly and stung in her eyes. The blonde had just undoubtedly earned herself a suspension, and she had done it for *Emma.* She had done it to protect Emma. She had done it to send a message, and while the rest of the school heard the message as a warning to let Emma be, Regina had heard an entirely different message.

I accept you and I love you no matter what.

Ms. Blue was there then, placing her hands firmly on Kathryn's shoulders. "Okay, dear. I believe you've made your point. You will need to come with me now."

Kathryn smiled softly, almost shyly, at Regina as Ms. Blue led her away and out of the cafeteria, and Regina watched her go, feeling her world start to stitch itself back together again. She wasn't as alone as she thought.

She could do this.

Once Kathryn was gone, Regina turned back to the table to find that Emma was gone as well. Her heart sank and her brows furrowed as she glanced around, confused. Noticing, David squeezed her shoulder and pointed toward the bathroom. Regina nodded and took off in that direction.

When she entered the bathroom, she found another teacher helping Emma run water through her hair. "I think I'd rather just go home and take a shower if that's okay," Emma told the teacher softly.

"I'm sure that will be fine, Emma," the teacher, Mrs. Liddell, replied tenderly, patting the blonde on the shoulder, and that was when Emma looked up and noticed Regina in the mirror's reflection.

Regina was hovering by the door when Emma turned to face her, her cheeks red with her embarrassment. She sighed as they looked at one another, the

air in the bathroom seeming thicker with each passing second. "Guess you picked a real winner, huh?" Emma joked quietly, sadly, shrugging her shoulders.

Regina didn't even hesitate when she replied, "Yes," and then without another word, the cheerleader shot through the small distance between them. One hand flew out to wrap around the back of Emma's damp neck, and the other found her hip as Regina latched onto the blonde, pulled her close, and fiercely crashed their lips together.

Emma was stunned by the action, but she only hesitated a moment before pressing back into Regina. She clutched onto the cheerleader as she inhaled Regina's scent and reveled in the soft curves of her lips.

They were interrupted by the sharp clearing of a throat, and both girls jerked apart. They shuffled awkwardly in place, cheeks blazing, as they avoided Mrs. Liddell's gaze.

The teacher tried not to chuckle as she said, "And I am unfortunately going to have to give you each a detention now for inappropriate conduct on school grounds."

Emma bit her lip and looked up at Regina. She was surprised to see a bright smile light up the cheerleader's expression followed by the sound of an incredibly beautiful peal of laughter that spilled through Regina's perfect lips.

Regina beamed brightly even as she reached up to wipe a stream of tears from each of her cheeks. "So worth it," she laughed out wetly, and Emma felt her heart expand to fill her entire body with the magnitude of those three little words.

Chapter 18

A/N: Hello everyone. I apologize for the wait. I am swamped with work. We have reached the final chapter of this story; however, there will be an epilogue that I will post soon, likely within the next few days. I want to say thank you to everyone who supported this story and helped inspire me to turn it into so much more than it was ever intended to be. Thank you for all of the favorites, follows, and reviews. I've appreciated your support and enthusiasm more than I can say. I hope you all enjoy this final chapter and the coming epilogue. XO- Chrmdpoet

Chapter Eighteen

Regina woke early Tuesday morning. She stretched out her limbs, groaning as a few joints popped with the strain. She rubbed at her cheek, which felt tender and sore, and then smiled as she realized why. She had fallen asleep with her phone pressed to her ear, her late-night conversation with Emma having drifted into quiet, deep breathing.

Regina checked the screen of her phone to see if the call was still connected. It was.

She bit her bottom lip, smiling around it, and quietly listened. She could still hear Emma's soft breaths, and Regina sighed as she closed her eyes and pressed the phone to her chest. She didn't even care that she was feeling disgustingly sappy, because it was a feeling unlike any she had had before.

It devoured her body in thrilling tingles. It fluttered in her stomach. It beat in her chest. It overwhelmed her entirely, and she found she was helpless to stop it. She didn't *want* to stop it.

She wanted to revel in it.

This is what she had been so afraid of? This is what she had been dreading for over a year now? This...finally falling for a girl. She had been so

terrified of what it would mean for her and of how it would change things, change her entire life, and it *had*. It certainly had changed things, but Regina was finally beginning to understand that change wasn't always so scary or so terrible.

Sometimes, change was *exactly* what a person needed. Sometimes, it was wondrous. Sometimes, it was *everything.*

Sure, things weren't kicking off to a great start with certain people, her mother among them, and yeah, that sucked, but Regina couldn't bring herself to care; not when she was waking up surrounded by the sleepy warmth of her bed and with the sound of Emma Swan's easy breathing like a lullaby against her ears and drumming in her chest. She couldn't bring herself to care, because for the first time in her life, Regina was truly being herself.

She was chasing *her own* dreams, living out *her own* desires, and throwing caution to the wind for once. She was loving, and god, it was a rush.

Regina let out a soft sigh as she settled into her pillow and held her phone in front of her face. She stared at Emma's name on the caller ID and the dorky selfie the blonde sent her the night before to use as a contact picture. She smiled and a quiet laugh escaped her as she stared at the picture, taking in Emma's thick black-rimmed glasses framing emerald eyes that were blown comically wide as the blonde smiled so intensely that nearly all her teeth were visible.

I know I look like a loser, Emma had texted after sending the picture, *but I'm your girlfriend now so you have to think I'm cute regardless.*

Regina had laughed softly and sent her back the truest reply she could think of. *You* are *beautiful.*

"*Mm, so are you."*

Regina startled as she realized that Emma had spoken to her. "W-what?" she stuttered out, caught off-guard. "Did I say that out loud?"

Emma chuckled into the phone. *"Yes."*

Regina's cheeks colored a soft pink even as she smiled and buried her face into her pillow a bit. "Oh," she laughed. "Well, I stand by what I said."

"*Good,"* Emma told her, voice scratchy from sleep, *"so do I."* She stretched and yawned before quietly adding, *"Good morning, Regina."*

Regina felt those words thunder around her heart and through her entire body. She was glad no one could see her in that moment, because her smile had to be devouring her entire face. "Good morning, Emma."

They were silent for several long moments, simply listening to one another breathe, before Regina heard Emma's laughter spill into the phone. It started slow and soft but quickly grew.

"What's so funny?" Regina asked.

When Emma was finally able to speak through her laughter, she whispered, *"We totally slept together last night."*

Regina gaped as those words seemed to echo repeatedly inside her mind. Her mouth moved wordlessly as she blinked into the empty space of her bedroom. When she recovered from the heat wave that blasted through her body, she cleared her throat and laughed softly as she said, "This was not how I imagined our first time going."

"*Oh, so you've imagined our first time?"*

Regina bit her lip. "Maybe."

The answering silence made the cheerleader's heart race until she heard Emma's tiny whimper of a response. *"Me too."*

Regina let out a quiet breath of relief. "I don't want to rush it, though," she told the blonde, and Emma was quick to agree.

"*Me neither. We'll just...you know, do it when we're ready."*

Regina smiled into the phone as she quietly agreed. "When we're ready."

They stayed on the phone in silence afterward for what felt like forever until Emma groaned and asked, *"Are you getting up?"*

"I really don't want to," Regina admitted.

"*Likewise, but I need to double-check my homework,"* Emma told her.

"You did that last night before you got in bed."

"*Okay, so I need to triple-check my homework,"* Emma told her, laughing. *"Go to sleep a nerd. Wake up a nerd. We're consistent like that, babe."*

Regina chuckled as she pulled her phone away to glance at the time. It was still quite early. "Emma," she said, placing the phone back to her ear.

"*Yes, my cheerleading goddess?"* Emma joked, and Regina just rolled her eyes, though her smile never faltered.

"Would you like a ride to school?"

Emma grinned as she rolled out of bed. *"Absolutely."*

Regina showered and dressed quickly, double-checked her reflection in the mirror to make sure she was presentable, and then grabbed her bag and headed for the stairs.

"And just where are you running off to so early?"

Regina nearly fell over, caught off guard by her mother's sharp tone breaking through the stillness of the house at early morning. "O-oh, Mother," she stammered, turning to see her mother sitting on the couch in the shadows and sipping at a cup of coffee. "You startled me."

"Why?" Cora asked, her gaze penetrating. "Were you afraid I would discover what you are up to? Have you something to be guilty for?"

Jaw working back and forth, Regina straightened her back and tilted her chin in the air. "No," she replied firmly. "I have nothing to be guilty for."

"Then where are you headed?" Cora questioned. "You are sneaking out nearly an hour earlier than usual. Why is that?"

Regina let out an exasperated sigh. "Please stop being so dramatic, Mother," she drawled. "I'm not 'sneaking out'. I'm simply leaving early, and if you must know, it is because I plan to pick Emma up for school."

"Emma?" Cora repeated quietly, an edge to her voice. "The orphan girl who turned you into a--"

"Don't!" Regina snapped harshly. "Do not even finish that sentence, Mother."

Regina had never been confident where her mother was concerned. She had never had the courage to stand up to the woman, but coming out had given her that courage. She finally felt like she knew who she was and like she was only just beginning to figure out the point of it all, life. She was finding happiness and acceptance, maybe not from everyone but from a select few people she truly cared about, and that meant more than she could even express in words. She didn't feel so trapped anymore, so warped, so jaded. She felt free, and she wasn't going to let her mother shove her back into that tiny box she had been living in before she met Emma Swan.

She took a step closer to her mother and kept her gaze locked on Cora's, refusing to back down or apologize. "No one *turned* me into anything. I haven't been brainwashed or sworn into a mindless cult. I haven't been bitten by a supernatural creature. I haven't contracted an illness. I haven't *transformed* in any way whatsoever. I'm just *gay,* Mother, much like I'm Latina. It isn't something I can help or something I just suddenly became. It is just a part of me, and it's a part of me that I am quickly realizing I love. I wish you could love that part of me, too, but I'm not going to beg you to. I'm not going to beg you to understand, and I'm not going to let you try to make me feel guilty or ashamed, not of being gay and not of being with Emma."

Cora's expression somehow both hardened and softened, showing her confliction, but the woman said nothing. Her gaze fell to her lap as Regina took another step forward. "I don't care if you don't think she's good enough," the cheerleader continued. "She's the person I choose, and unlike you, she accepts all of me. She doesn't hate me even though she's had plenty of reason to. She makes me feel like I can be anything, but mostly she makes me feel like it's perfectly okay to just be me."

"Regina, *please,*" Cora drawled bitterly, "and you say *I'm* the dramatic one. Why must you put on this show? What is it you think you are doing, dear?"

Regina stood silently for a moment before a small smile touched her lips. "Changing."

When that earned nothing but silence from her mother, Regina turned on her heel. She headed for the door, but turned back after only a few steps. "And you know," she added softly, "I don't know why you wouldn't want that for me. You taught me to be a selfish person. You taught me how to manipulate people to get what I want. You taught me to indulge all those ugly parts of me, and I did. I could have just said no. I could have just ignored your advice. I could have been kinder to people, so it's my fault, too, but I have a second chance now, and Emma is giving me that second chance. She's helping me to give *myself* a second chance, and for the first time in a really long time, I don't feel like a monster. I'm starting to love myself, and I don't understand how my own mother could ever disapprove of that."

She didn't wait for a reply before leaving. Her mother was a rigid woman. She wouldn't bend after a simple speech. She would require some time, if she ever came around at all.

Regina knew she would have to accept that her Mother may never approve, so she left. She wasn't going to let that knowledge and the feelings it stirred inside her tear her apart. Not today.

Emma was waiting for her.

Regina's mind wandered as she drove along the streets of Storybrooke. So much had changed in such a short period of time. She was no longer the trophy daughter her mother wanted her to be and she no longer had a clue as to her social standing at school. Regina was genuinely shocked to realize that she didn't care. Sure, she still feared rejection, but what teenage girl didn't? Being at the top didn't matter anymore, because she finally realized that the world wasn't going to end if she wasn't.

That quiet moment with David in that dark closet a year prior when Regina's heart had thundered through a timid confession of her most terrifying truth had felt so monumental at the time. It had felt larger than life, and Regina had expected it to change everything, but it never grew. It never expanded beyond that dark, quiet space, never left the safety of the pact they'd made. It had been but a small step toward an inevitable edge.

Falling for Emma, though, sent her spiraling over and tumbling down. It started with just another small step, and then Regina found herself sprinting toward the edge with full abandon. She finally found the courage to leap. Emma Swan had taken her life and shaken it up, but Regina was the one who flipped it upside down and reveled in watching everything scatter into disarray before settling into something altogether better and more beautiful.

Regina pulled up in front of Emma's house, her heart already racing. She didn't even try to contain her smile as she darted up the walkway and onto the porch. Before she could knock, the door swung open to reveal Emma's wide smile and green eyes framed by her thick black glasses. "Hi," Regina greeted breathlessly, her stomach flipping at the sight of her girlfriend then flipping again at the thought of actually having a girlfriend to call her girlfriend.

God, she thought, *maybe* I'm *the nerd.*

But then Emma narrowed her eyes at her and said, "You were speeding."

"What?" Regina asked, her head tilting slightly as her brows furrowed.

Emma propped a hand on her hip playfully and shook her head. "You were speeding. You texted me exactly twelve minutes ago that you were on your

way. If you had been going the speed limit then it would have taken y--"

Nope, Regina thought, grinning, *she is definitely the nerd.*

Regina stepped over the threshold and pressed her hand gently over Emma's mouth to keep the blonde from finishing. She laughed softly as she pressed closer to her girlfriend. "As adorable as your need to turn everything into a math problem *is,* Emma, don't you think your time would be better spent thanking me for my speedy arrival with a kiss?"

Emma laughed before shrugging and popping through the small space between them to plant a smacking kiss on Regina's lips. When she pulled back, chuckling, Regina narrowed her eyes and said, "You can do better than that."

Their laughter pressed into a single hum as Regina pulled Emma's face to hers again and met her in a commanding kiss. They melted into one another, hands timidly exploring as they stood in the open doorway and held one another. This time, when they separated, both were breathless.

"Wow," Emma whispered, and a brilliant smile spread over Regina's lips.

"You see," the cheerleader laughed, "*better*." Her body was buzzing from that one kiss, tingles rippling down her spine and pooling in a painful knot at the base. Teenage hormones were a trip.

"Come on," Emma told her, motioning for Regina to follow. "I just gotta grab my bag from my room and then we can go."

"That's fine," Regina told her, shutting the door behind her. "It's still early." She followed Emma up the stairs and into the blonde's room, stopping to lean against the doorframe as Emma collected her bag. Her gaze roamed around the empty room and she felt an aching tug in her chest as the same thought she'd had the first time she'd been in Emma's room swam to the forefront of her mind. Where was *Emma* in this room?

"Hey," the cheerleader said softly. When Emma looked up at her with a smile and a brow arched in question, Regina took a breath and asked, "Why

is your room so empty?"

Emma shrugged, glancing around. "I don't keep a lot of stuff."

"Why not?"

"Habit, I guess," the blonde told her. "I've bounced around a lot, so I try to never get too attached to one place. This is the longest I've ever stayed at one home, but I guess habits are hard to break."

Regina's heart fluttered in her chest as she sighed and crossed the room. She wrapped her arms gently around Emma's middle and leaned in to press a kiss to the blonde's nose. "Well, *get attached,* because I don't plan on letting you go anywhere."

"Oh no?" Emma laughed, looping her arms around Regina as well. "And how do you plan to entice me to stay?"

Regina's eyes narrowed and she clucked her tongue as she tilted her head in thought. "Hmm," she hummed. "I could ask your teachers to give you extra homework. I know how much you love homework." She barely managed to get the last words out through her laughter as Emma pinched her side and playfully pushed her away.

"You're lucky you look so good in a cheerleading uniform," Emma teased, and Regina laughed even harder.

She had never felt so carefree and happy in her entire life, and Regina didn't even care that she probably looked and sounded like a giddy love-struck idiot. If this was what it felt like to finally let go and be true to who she was, then it was worth it. She leaned over and pressed a kiss to Emma's cheek. "Damn right I do." She then lightly smacked Emma's ass through her baggy jeans and darted from the room, calling over her shoulder. "Let's go."

Emma felt like she could burst she was so full in that moment. Her heart raced and her stomach flipped and she was fairly certain there had to be rainbows shooting out of her ears at this point, and she freaking *loved* it.

She smiled, shaking her head, as she followed the cheerleader back downstairs and out to the waiting car.

As they drove to school, their hands clasped over the console between them, they chatted about random stuff like Mr. Hopper's obsessive glasses cleaning and the cafeteria's pizza that tasted more like cardboard than anything. They laughed at each other and with each other and forgot that there was anyone in the world who wouldn't support them. In the small blissful bubble of Regina's warm car, it was only them, and they were perfect.

"Have you talked to Kathryn?" Emma asked as they neared the school.

"No," Regina sighed, "but that's not surprising. Her parents probably took her phone away as punishment for her suspension."

"Do you think you guys will be okay?"

Regina smiled. "Something tells me that Kathryn and I will be just fine," she told the blonde, and Emma shared her smile.

"Good, and if you see her or get to talk to her, maybe you could thank her for me," Emma said, shrugging as if it wasn't a big deal though her voice said otherwise. "You know...for what she said at school. No one's ever tried to protect me like that, and I know it was really for *you*, but still--"

"Emma," Regina interjected softly, squeezing Emma's hand to stop the blonde from spiraling into a long rambling explanation. When Emma quieted and squeezed her hand in return, Regina looked over at her and smiled. "I'll tell her."

"Thanks."

They pulled into the school parking lot and reality seemed to finally sink in. Their blissful bubble would have to pop. Regina sighed as she shut off the car and leaned back in her seat. Emma turned in her seat to face her and quietly asked, "Are you sure you don't want to go in separately?"

Regina turned to look at her, confused. "What?" she asked. "Why would I want to do that?"

"This is a big deal," Emma told her, shaking her head. "No one's ever tried to merge the cheerleaders and the nerds before. The building might implode or something. Do we really want to be responsible for that kind of epic disaster?"

Regina snorted with her laughter. "You are such a nerd."

Emma just chuckled and poked at Regina's side before sighing and admitting the real reason behind her question. "It's just, I would understand if you wanted to avoid all the talk and everything." She rubbed her thumb over the back of Regina's hand. "I don't want you to be embarrassed to be seen with me."

Regina turned fully in her seat then and wrapped both her hands around the blonde's. "Hey," she said firmly, "I'm *not* embarrassed to be seen with you. Don't think that, because it isn't true, and people are going to talk no matter *what* we do, so let them talk."

A small smile touched Emma's lips. "When did you stop caring so much what people thought?"

"When I stopped being an idiot," Regina chuckled. She then sighed and leaned her head against the soft leather of her seat. "When I realized that it's more important to be myself than to try to be what other people expected me to be."

Emma reached up to push her glasses back into position before arching a brow at the cheerleader. "So are you saying that you don't want to be popular anymore?" she teased. "Because I think I can help with that."

Regina laughed softly and reached out to run the backs of her fingers over Emma's cheek before tugging gently on a strand of blonde hair. "I'm saying I want to be happy," she answered. She then smiled warmly at Emma and added, "I think you can help me with *that* too."

Emma's heart swelled until it felt like it was filling her entire chest. She practically jumped across the console to wrap her arms around Regina and kiss her senseless, laughing all the way.

When they finally exited the car, they were almost running late for the first bell. They made their way quickly across the quad and toward the front doors of the school. They stopped outside the heavy double doors and looked at one another.

"Ready to do this?" Emma asked. She held out her hand, palm up and open. Regina smiled at her before slipping her hand into Emma's and tangling their fingers together. She squeezed tightly as she nodded and turned back toward the waiting doors.

"I'm ready."

Chapter 19: Epilogue

A/N: Thank you again everyone for all the support for this story. I so appreciate all of you taking the time to read, favorite, follow, and review.

I wrote the epilogue to a soundtrack of "Whispers" by Dave Baxter. Give it a try. I hope you enjoy this final installment. Take care, everyone. XO-Chrmdpoet

Epilogue

Six Years Later

"So, I see you made the train," Kathryn laughed when Regina stepped off the train, pulling her luggage. "Get over here and hug me!"

Regina shook her head, smiling, and picked up her pace. She met Kathryn in a one-armed embrace, careful not to let go of her luggage. They squeezed one another tightly and planted quick kisses on each other's cheeks.

"It's so good to see you," Kathryn whispered as they held one another. "Feels like it's been forever."

"I know," Regina sighed, rubbing Kathryn's back. "I'm sorry I haven't been up to visit more. You know how hectic things have gotten at school. I have been swamped with all the work."

"I know," Kathryn chuckled, as they pulled out of their hug and made their way toward the stairs. "I'm just glad I'm getting to see you at all."

"Ah, the pros of out-of-town conferences," Regina replied, smiling.

Kathryn hailed a cab when they made it to the street. "It's just another law conference, right? Why do you have to go to this one?"

"I don't *have* to attend," Regina clarified, "but my professor did offer extra-credit to anyone who attends and writes a follow-up essay in response to the main topics of discussion. I figured it was a perfect opportunity to gain a small grade boost and fit in a visit in the process. It was win-win, really."

"I'm glad seeing me is considered a win," Kathryn teased.

Regina nudged the blonde's side with her elbow. "Always."

"So, how are things with Yasmin?" Kathryn asked after the waiter took their order.

Regina sighed and leaned back in her chair. She had been dreading this question since she stepped off the train. She ran a hand through her hair and took a sip of her martini.

"Shit," Kathryn muttered. "What happened?"

"We broke up."

"Yeah, I gathered as much from your reaction," Kathryn replied. "But why? And when? And why am I just now finding out about this?"

Regina pressed the tip of her tongue to her top lip, laughed roughly, and shook her head. She struggled to get the words out, but they eventually scorched their way up her throat like bile. "She slept with someone else."

Kathryn's gasp was harsh enough to choke her. When several people in the restaurant turned to look at her, she coughed roughly and waved them off. She then turned back to Regina. "Are you fucking kidding me?" she hissed, sure to keep her voice low.

"Oh trust me," Regina sighed, "I wish I was."

"When did this happen?" Kathryn questioned. "I mean, when did she tell you?"

"Two weeks ago," Regina admitted before taking another sip of her martini. When Kathryn pulled a face, she put her hands up. "I know, I know, I should have called you. I just needed some time."

Kathryn reached across the table and opened her hand, waggling her fingers at Regina. Regina gave a small smile as she leaned forward to slip her hand into Kathryn's. She took a sharp, deep breath as Kathryn squeezed her hand.

"I know you probably don't want to talk about it," the blonde said, "but if you ever do, you know--"

"I know," Regina replied, squeezing Kathryn's hand in turn. "Thank you." She sighed. "Another relationship down the drain. It helps to be here, though, having dinner and drinks with my best friend. That helps more than anything."

"Well," Kathryn chuckled, "let's order another round then, shall we?"

Regina grinned and shook her head. "Okay, but let's keep it light," she laughed. "The conference is at eight in the morning, and I can't be late."

"Deal." Kathryn waved the waiter over.

When their next drinks arrived, Kathryn raised her glass. "Here's to fresh starts without cheating girlfriends," she toasted.

Regina sighed around a laugh, lifted her glass and tapped it gently against Kathryn's. "Here's to lasting friendship."

They both took a drink, and then Kathryn slipped an olive into her mouth. "I'm seriously going to miss Yasmin's accent, though," she laughed as she crunched into her olive. "Is that okay to say? I mean, boo on her, seriously, but I'm not even gay and I got tingles every time she said 'K*ah*thryn'."

Regina laughed loudly and shook her head. "I've really missed you."

Regina packed her notepad into her bag once the conference was over and made her way toward the aisle to exit. When she stepped into the main

lobby, she took a moment to shake the hands of the conference speakers, and then headed for the doors.

"Well, well, Regina Mills."

Regina froze in her tracks. Her breath left her in a rushing wind. Her heart instantly began to hammer away at her ribs.

That voice.

Regina braced herself and turned slowly on the spot. Still, she wasn't prepared for the massive blast to the past that swept over her as she came face to face with Emma Swan. Tingles instantly erupted at the base of her spine and in her stomach and over every inch of her flesh.

Emma stood a few feet away, leaning against the small fountain in the center of the lobby. Her long, blonde hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, and her body, toner than Regina had ever seen it, was wrapped tightly in a navy button-up, dark-wash skinny jeans, and knee-high tan boots. She wore a slightly crooked smile as she shook her head and said, "How long has it been, huh? Four ... five years?"

Regina swallowed thickly as she took a hesitant step forward. "Five," she croaked before clearing her throat and trying again. "Five years."

"Mm," Emma hummed with a nod, that smile never leaving her lips as her eyes roamed over Regina's body, clad in a form-fitted crimson dress, dark tights and black pumps. Heat rolled through her lower abdomen, crept down her thighs, and burned between them. When she locked gazes with Regina, her voice dropped an octave and she breathily said, "You look good, Regina."

Regina felt those words ripple over her flesh, down the length of her body and back up. She felt them in the bowing bend of her spine and in the heat radiating from Emma's gaze. She nodded almost absent-mindedly. "And you," she whispered, the words barely existing before dying in the thickening tension that devoured the space between them.

The hotel room's door thudded against the wall as they barreled through it. Emma's back slammed against the heavy metal so that her breath shot from her lungs and against the wet press of Regina's eager mouth. Her hands dug into Regina's hips with a need unlike any she had felt in years. She shuddered as Regina's fingers slipped behind the waistband of her jeans and pulled at her shirt before burrowing under and scratching across the flat plane of her stomach. The touch was achingly familiar and yet deliciously new.

The taste of Emma's tongue as it slipped between Regina's lips was intoxicating. She sucked at the muscle as she worked the buttons on Emma's shirt and yanked it down the blonde's shoulders. Emma's muscles rippled under her fingertips, and Regina felt her pulse throb between her legs. Five years, and her body still ached for Emma like it was made for her.

Regina felt the zipper tug at her back, the flesh prickling as the cool air of the room washed over her with each inch Emma's fingers revealed. They rolled off the door. Its heavy weight clicked back into place behind them as they stumbled toward the bed, nearly breaking a lamp in the process.

Emma laughed out loud as she caught it just in time to prevent it from hitting the floor. She shoved it back on the table then pounced on Regina, jerking the brunette up into her arms. Regina's legs wrapped tightly around Emma's waist, her dress straining up around her hips even as it hung loosely off her shoulders. Emma tugged her hair, and Regina bit down on the blonde's lip.

"God, Regina," Emma groaned at the tiny shock of pain that quickly evolved into pleasure, and Regina thought her name had never sounded better.

She was proved wrong countless times after her back hit the sheets.

"What happened with us?" Emma whispered as they lay tangled together, Regina's naked thigh strung over the blonde's and her fingers scratching at Emma's scalp.

Regina sighed. They had lain together for hours after making love, just talking and touching and rediscovering one another. She told Emma about her continued schooling at Princeton, and Emma told her about working as a bounty hunter in Boston. Regina had definitely been surprised by that one, given that Emma had a bachelor's degree in education and was certified to teach. Emma had realized soon after graduating that she wasn't quite ready to settle down yet, though. She wanted thrill, and being a bounty hunter gave her that. It seemed Emma really loved her work, and still had plans to settle down and teach later, so Regina was happy for her. They'd talked about Regina's parents and Kathryn and David, Mary Margaret and Belle and Ruby. It almost felt like they were right back in Storybrooke.

They'd talked about everything, and so Regina had been afraid that this topic would eventually come up. It wasn't one she liked to think about, let alone speak of. The day they'd broken up had been the hardest day of Regina's life.

"Life," she answered. She shook her head gently back and forth and pressed a kissed to Emma's tangled hair. "Distance." Another kiss. "Everything."

"Yeah," Emma whispered against Regina's stomach. "We made it work that first year of college, though."

"We tried," Regina sighed. "I tried."

She felt Emma swallow. "I could have tried harder," the blonde admitted. "I ... there was just so much distance between us, and we hardly ever got to see each other, and when I did come to visit, you had so many friends at Princeton already, and I ... I didn't want to hold you back."

Regina closed her eyes and tried to release the pain in her chest. She felt like she couldn't breathe. "I remember," she choked out, and she did. She remembered those words leaving Emma's mouth in sobs. She remembered their last kiss, and how salty and wet it tasted. She remembered taking Emma to the train station. She remembered laying in her dorm that evening, convinced she was going to die from the pain of it. She remembered everything.

"I'm sorry," Emma whispered, and Regina nodded against the top of her head.

"Me too," she muttered.

They lay in silence for several long moments before Regina cleared her throat. Her heart thudded fearfully in her chest when she quietly asked, "Will I see you again?"

Emma pressed kisses to her stomach, to the patch of hair at the junction of her legs, and squeezed tightly around her. It was the only comfort she could offer, because her words offered nothing but uncertainty. "I don't know."

Regina understood that, though. It wasn't about not wanting to see one another. It wasn't about running. It wasn't about how they felt. It was about life, their individual lives and how separate they were. They were on two completely different paths, living multiple states away from one another. It wasn't always as easy and picking up everything and abandoning a chosen path to take off somewhere else and hope for the best. That wasn't practical. It wasn't easy, and it was terrifying. Regina understood that. She understood that life, sometimes, just had a way of pulling people apart.

When Regina went back to Kathryn's later that evening, she kept her time with Emma to herself. She smiled and spent time with her best friend, and she ignored the feeling that stirred inside. It was the same feeling she'd had all those years ago; only this time, she knew she wasn't going to die. She didn't know if that was better or worse.

Eleven Months Later

Regina's breath left her in a rush when David told her that Mary Margaret mentioned something about Emma being in New Jersey; something about tailing a guy she had to bring in or something. Regina didn't hear much after Emma's name and location.

They were in the same state.

It took a while for Regina to calm her heart, to talk some sense back into herself. As soon as David passed along the information, her head had become a swarm of possibilities, but she eventually drifted back down to reality. What were the chances that they would run into one another?

Slim to none, she reminded herself.

She didn't even know if Emma still had her number, or if the blonde would even want to see her or would have time if she did. She didn't think it mattered. What would they do? Go out for dinner? Coffee? Land in the nearest hotel room? Regina's apartment?

Regina scolded herself for getting carried away with such thoughts, such ridiculous hopes. She needed to accept that Emma Swan was a part of her past, not her present. She needed to learn to let it go, let *her* go, and live her damn life.

She woke in the middle of the night to a knock on her door. Regina rubbed at her eyes as she made her way through the apartment. "Who is it?" she called through the door, not wanting to risk her safety.

"Regina," the voice on the other side sighed.

Regina's heart slammed against her ribs almost painfully. Her hands shot to the chain on the door and slid it quickly back. She flicked the lock on the knob and jerked the door open.

Emma didn't say a word. She didn't smile. She didn't breathe, it seemed.

They both simply stood frozen, staring at one another, and then Emma moved.

Regina met her in a heated kiss, and they said their hellos with eager fingers and stumbled steps to Regina's bed.

"How did you know where I lived?" Regina asked her as they lay together in her bed, the morning light creeping in through the window.

Emma chuckled and kissed her temple. "Finding people is sort of what I do now."

"And you *wanted* to find me," Regina whispered.

"I found you a long time ago," Emma confessed, running her fingers along Regina's thigh. "I must've made this trip a dozen times. I just actually had a reason to be here this time, and I figured ... I *hoped* maybe you might want to see me too, maybe I could just be brave enough to knock on your door."

"I'm glad you did," Regina told her, her entire body alive with the feeling those words gave her.

"Yeah," Emma muttered against her skin. "I've thought about that day in New York so many times in the last year. I can't get it out of my head."

Regina sighed and closed her eyes. "Me too."

Emma shifted so that she could press her lips to Regina's. "It always comes back to *you*, you know."

Regina swallowed harshly and nodded, her eyes stinging. She did know. She did.

"I think about us," Emma whispered. "I think about that first day I tutored you." She laughed. "You fell asleep."

Regina chuckled wetly and pinched Emma's side. "I was in character."

Emma laughed even harder at that. She propped herself up between Regina's legs, resting her chin on her hands just above the brunette's stomach. "You were a typical bored jock, falling asleep during tutoring."

"And you were a typical nerd," Regina fired back, "making Chemistry puns and pushing your glasses up your nose."

Emma sighed and kissed Regina's chest. "You loved me."

The laughter faded as pain bloomed in Regina's chest once more. "I did," she whispered, holding Emma's emerald gaze. "I do."

Emma sighed. She tried to smile around a choked sob. "I do," she repeated, nodding.

They fell asleep some time later, still wrapped around one another. Regina knew Emma would be gone when she woke.

Three Years Later

"Ugh, god," Kathryn groaned, burrowing her head beneath her travel pillow to block out the light. She pushed her freezing feet under Regina's thigh and scooted further down in the backseat of the SUV. Regina smacked at her legs as she shifted to accommodate the move, but it was useless. Kathryn wasn't budging. "How the hell did we let him talk us into this?"

Regina's head rested against the window pane, a sleep-mask covering her eyes. It remained in place as she sighed. "I plead temporary insanity."

David chuckled from the driver's seat, glancing back at his sister and the woman he considered his adopted sister. "Oh come on, it's barely a nine-hour drive. You guys are acting like we've been on the road for days."

"We are not cut out for road trips," Kathryn grumbled. "We already had to pull over once for Regina to throw up, and--"

Regina smacked Kathryn with the pillow she was snuggling in her lap. "I told you the Dramamine required at least thirty minutes to kick in, but *no*! No one listens to me."

"*And,*" Kathryn repeated, ignoring Regina's interjection, "we've only been on the road for two hours."

"Yeah, and you two are already half-asleep in the backseat," David laughed. "It's ridiculous."

Regina pulled off her sleep mask and threw it toward the front of the SUV. "Perhaps that is because *someone* made us leave at five-thirty in the morning, David!"

"Sing it," Kathryn chimed, rolling over with a huff.

David continued to laugh. "Just making sure we get there early enough," he defended. "Besides, the way you two look, you're going to need the extra couple of hours to get fixed up. You will both be thanking me. Wait and see."

"We could have taken a flight and already been 'fixed up' when we arrived in less than half the time this road trip requires," Regina countered. She then smacked Kathryn's thigh again, and the blonde grunted. "How did he talk us into this again?"

"I don't know," Kathryn huffed. "Something about missing us and it being just like old times when we used to all ride to school together."

"Oh right," Regina chuckled. "I can't believe we fell for that."

"I can," David laughed.

"I would hit you with my pillow if I wasn't afraid you'd wreck and kill us all," Kathryn told him. "You're lucky I value my life."

"And you love me," David added and Kathryn only grumbled.

"I don't know why you two are complaining," he continued. "It's not like either of you is having to do any work. I drove all the way up there to pick you both up and I'm driving us all the way back to Maine, no trade-offs or anything, not to mention the fact that neither of you has a date for tonight so I'm escorting you both despite being the only one who actually *did* have a date."

"Mary Margaret actually wanted to go to our ten-year class reunion with you?" Kathryn asked.

"She didn't really *want* to, but then who really wants to go to a class reunion that isn't their own?" David chuckled. "She would have gone, though."

Kathryn sighed. "She's definitely a keeper."

"That she is," David agreed, smiling at his twin in the rearview mirror. He then glanced toward the opposite end of the backseat to see Regina chewing on her bottom lip and staring at the back of the passenger seat so intensely that he was surprised she wasn't burning a hole through it. "Regina?"

Regina's head popped up. "What?" she blurted, looking first at David then at Kathryn. "What did you say?"

Kathryn nudged Regina's thigh with her foot. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Regina quickly replied, plastering on a smile. "Yes. I'm fine."

"I don't know," David sighed, catching her attention.

"What?" Regina asked him. "What do you mean?"

David smiled sadly at her in the rearview mirror. "I don't know if Emma will be there," he told her. "Mary Margaret said she was considering it, but she never confirmed if she would be there or not. I guess we'll find out when we get there."

"O-oh," Regina stammered, cheeks flushing. "I wasn't--"

"Yes you were," Kathryn interrupted, twisting so that she could reach Regina's hand. She tangled their fingers together and squeezed, and Regina returned the pressure.

The lump in her throat felt like it might never go down.

David, Kathryn, and Regina made their way across the quad of their old high school and toward the front double doors. Regina slowed to a stop as the other two went ahead. They only made it a few feet before they realized her absence and turned.

"Regina?" Kathryn called.

"I'm fine," Regina assured, waving them off. "I just need a moment. I will catch up with you."

"Are you sure?" Kathryn questioned, brow furrowing with concern.

"Of course," Regina chuckled. "Go ahead."

Kathryn nodded, but David didn't move. He squeezed his sister's arm as a sign for her to wait and then crossed back over to Regina. She avoided his gaze as he placed his hands on her arms, sliding them up and down a few times. "Hey," he whispered."

"I'm fine, David," she replied, "honestly."

"You keep saying that," he told her, "but I don't think you really mean it."

She looked up at him them, sighed as she rocked on her heels, and pressed her tongue to the inside of her cheek. Her eyes burned and she hated the feeling. "It's been a long time," she whispered. "That's all."

David nodded and squeezed her arms. "Yeah, I know, but look ... things are a lot better now, right? You're happy. You're successful. Your mom has finally come around even if she *is* still a bitch."

Regina laughed wetly at that, reaching up to catch a tear before it could fall and mar her makeup. "True."

David smiled. "I know it sucks that she isn't coming. Mary Margaret really thought she would show, and I know you wanted to see her, but maybe it's better this way. Try not to think about it and come inside with us. Have a drink. Dance. Have a good time."

Regina nodded, letting out a long sigh.

"Yeah?"

She smiled. "Yes. I still would like a moment, though. I won't be long."

"Promise?"

Regina rolled her eyes. "Promise."

The darker it got, the colder it became. Regina wrapped her arms around her middle and leaned against the large tree in the quad. She was surprised David or Kathryn hadn't come looking for her considering over an hour had passed since they arrived, and she still had yet to even enter the building. She couldn't bring herself to do it.

When Regina thought about high school, only one image came to mind. Blonde hair and green eyes and inexperienced kisses that somehow still managed to rock her soul. That was it. Emma. Just Emma. Everything else ... all the years that came before, all the work, all the football games and cheering tournaments ... all of it just melted away, and there was only Emma to fill her empty spaces.

Ten years later, and Regina could still feel the excited flutter in her stomach when she closed her eyes and pictured Emma's messy ponytail and baggy jeans and thick glasses. She could still feel the tug in chest when their past rolled through her mind like the flickering reel of an old home movie, when Emma's voice, her laughter, still echoed in Regina's head so clearly.

You know my name?

I tutor sometimes.

There's so much chemistry between us.

I'm walking you home, of course.

We're friends, right?

I don't want you to leave.

I want you to kiss me.

You're the most beautiful splotchy girl I've ever seen.

And then later ... Emma's hands slipping along her body; Regina could still feel those first explorations, Emma's lips ghosting over her heated flesh, so reverent.

I want to take my time.

I want you to feel everything, everywhere.

You know how much I love you, right?

So much, Regina. I love you so much.

She could still feel the ache, growing, screaming, tearing through her cells when they said goodbye. She could still hear the crack in Emma's voice, in her own. She could still feel the wetness on her cheeks, how it dried into frozen rivers and pulled painfully when she tried to talk. She could still feel the sinking inside, the way her body caved in on itself as she watched Emma board the train for the final time, knowing she wouldn't come back.

Regina still felt it all as if it she were reliving each moment, fresh and perfect and painful, and never fading. Emma was her constant, even in absence, even when she had known other lovers. There was always Emma, lining her thoughts, pulsing somewhere deep inside her.

"Reminiscing?"

Regina startled, eyes snapping open, lashes dusted with fresh tears.

And there she was, green eyes soft and staring. Emma.

Regina couldn't breathe. "You came," she choked out after several stunned seconds.

Emma smiled. "So did you."

"But Mary Margaret said you wouldn't be here," Regina told her, unconsciously gripping the tree behind her. She felt like her heart might leap out of her chest any minute.

Emma scuffed the toe of her boot against the grass as she swayed from side to side, her hands stuck in her back pockets. "I wasn't going to be," she confessed.

"Oh," Regina whispered, frowning. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear the answer to her next question, but she asked it anyway. "Why did you change your mind?"

Emma's stomach quivered. Her heart hammered. Every nerve in her body felt hot and alive. It had always been that way with Regina. Just being in her presence ... Emma had never had another experience quite like it. Regina made her feel alive in ways no one and nothing else ever had.

She swallowed down the lump in her throat. "Why do you think?"

Regina chuckled wetly as a tear slipped free and down her cheek. "It always comes back to this, doesn't it?"

"To us?" Emma whispered, struggling to get the words out. She took a step closer. "Yeah, it does."

Regina didn't wipe away her tears. She let them fall as she kept her eyes on Emma's. "I miss you," she croaked, unashamed. She just wanted to be honest. She was tired of holding it in. She was tired of telling herself it was better that way. She was tired, and Emma was here, looking at her like she was the moon or the sun or the stars or maybe all of it thrown together, and god, she was surprised she didn't scream the words.

Emma took another step forward. She said nothing, only nodding in agreement.

"You weren't going to come," Regina whispered, bracing herself as Emma moved closer.

Emma sighed and took another step forward. The distance between them still felt too vast. It always did. "It's hard," she answered, her voice cracking. She cleared her throat to cover it. "Every time we say hello, it gets so much harder to say goodbye again."

Regina understood more than words would allow her to express. She nodded and swallowed thickly, and before she could take her next breath, Emma's hands were slipping around her waist and inching up her spine. She closed her eyes, a sob escaping, as Emma's fingertips danced along the line of her jaw and down the tender length of her neck, as Emma's breath kissed her brow and her nose and hovered over her lips.

"Ten years and I still can't get you out of me," Emma whispered, her hands trailing down Regina's arms in the dark. Their fingers laced together easily, as if made to fit.

Regina nodded against Emma's forehead and pressed forward, letting her lips graze Emma's. They both gasped and pressed more firmly. Their mouths melded together, familiar, right. Regina brought a hand up to cup Emma's cheek as she kissed her. She kissed her like it would be their last. She never knew.

"I don't want you out of me, Emma," she confessed against Emma's lips. "I never did."

A small, strangled sob escaped Emma's throat, muted inside Regina's kiss. Their tears mingled together as their lips pressed, chests and hearts and bodies. They were alive, so alive, in this pain, in this reunion ... the only reunion that mattered.

They pressed their foreheads together as they stood wrapped around one another in the quad outside the place where it all began. Emma tucked a strand of hair behind Regina's ear, letting her fingers linger against the sensitive skin at her hairline. "Sometimes," she whispered, her thumb swiping through a track of tears, "your first love is your last."

Regina felt those words in her soul.

They stayed there, in a quiet embrace beneath that tree, for what felt like hours, before Emma sighed and asked, "Should we go inside?"

Regina laughed softly. "We came all this way," she whispered. "We may as well."

Emma smiled and led her toward the doors. When they reached them, she stopped and held up their joined hands between them. She nearly laughed as she squeezed Regina's fingers and asked, "Ready to do this?"

Regina felt like she was a teenager again. She looked over at Emma and for just a moment, she saw thick glasses and a messy ponytail and a goofy grin. She squeezed Emma's hand and nodded. "I'm ready."

Five Years Later

Regina moved quietly through the house, passing walls and tables lined with photos of her family, and toward the back door. She was careful not to make noise as she opened the door and peeked out into the backyard. Her heart swelled as she leaned against the door frame and took in the scene.

She watched a tiny hand point up toward the night sky. "There it is, Momma!"

Regina bit her lip to hold in her chuckle at the boy's excitement, his arm fully stretched as he shifted atop the grass. This was his favorite thing to do before bed. He loved the stars, especially the constellations.

"I see. Which one is that, Atlas?"

"Little dipper," Atlas answered, matter-of-factly, pushing his small glasses up on his nose in a way that reminded Regina so much of her wife.

Regina pulled the door quietly closed behind her and padded out across the yard. She dropped down onto the grass without a word, surprising both the boy and his mother. She chuckled when he narrowed his eyes at her.

"No sneaks, Mommy," he scolded.

"Sorry baby," Regina answered her son, leaning over his other mother to kiss his forehead.

"Hey, where's my kiss?"

Regina laughed softly and shifted to kiss her wife. "Patience, Emma," she whispered as she hovered over the same green eyes she had loved since she was seventeen. Their lips touched in a familiar press, still electric.

"Mommy, you see the dipper?" Atlas asked, drawing her attention.

Regina craned her neck up to gaze at the sky. "Yes, I do," she told him. "It's beautiful."

"It's science," he chimed, and Regina and Emma laughed together.

"You're turning our son into a nerd," Regina whispered as she pressed another kiss to Emma's lips.

Emma shrugged against the grass. "For now," she laughed, reaching up to tuck several strands of hair behind Regina's ear. "He might still grow up to be a cheerleader."

Regina chuckled and kissed her wife's forehead before settling down on the grass beside her. "As long as he's happy," she whispered, her fingers tangling through Emma's.

"Mm," Emma hummed. She squeezed Regina's hand. "Like us."

Regina smiled in the dark. "Like us."

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